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THE MAN **BRYCE WALTON** 6

Unlike many of his kind, Rainach liked humans. He felt a certain kinship with them, even though they were far, far down the gray trail of evolution. In any case, he certainly didn't want war with them. But it did want war, and that of course was all that mattered. Not for any particular reason that Rainach could comprehend—it was likely just curious. It was quite amoral, cared not at all about the effects of its probing. For it, the awful, cataclysmic war would be nothing more than an incident, a mildly diverting incident....

★ ★ **PLUS ANOTHER STARTLING NOVEL** ★ ★

FORBIDDEN WEAPON **Alfred Coppel** 100

Yes, Aurora was doomed, and within two weeks the warriors of Valkyr would have sown salt over the ruins of Astralis. But golden-haired Janessa knew that the men who attacked the star-king were no Aureorians but men from space, and that only one thing could save her now from being turned into a she-wolf and the whole galaxy from revivification—the Navigators' resorting to the forbidden weapon!

★ ★ **TWO STRANGE FEATURE-LENGTH NOVELETS** ★ ★

THE RED STUFF **John Beynon** 71

What was it? It was, well, a kind of red stuff. The trouble was, as fast as people wiped it off of things, it crept back. Crept back, too, onto the wiping rag, onto the hand holding the rag, up the arm....

GIRL WHO PRACTISED AKLAT **H. A. DeRosso** 46

It was funny. After thirty-two Earth-years of helling up and down the space lanes, he had to fall in love with a woman on Mars, the planet he hated above all others. Where Emmett Walton knew that even now the Merlians were returning inevitably to the ghastly custom of their kind—Aklatt!

★ ★ **3 GREAT SHORT STORIES** ★ ★

THE LAST SPACEMAN **Lester del Rey** 91

Sure, business was business, and if they could teleport materials from here to infinity in exactly no time now, fine. But that didn't give them the right to make cracks about Captain Josh Ames' old starship....

TRANS-PLUTONIAN **Milton Lesser** 63

A new planet, a new Earth-girl, and nothing to disturb Conklin's spatial paradise—so long, that is, as its hideous inhabitants stayed petrified!

THE DIFFERENCE **Kenneth O'Hara** 37

Was the thing that was Weber's beautiful wife really alive? And could he know the answer simply by killing her?

★ ★ **ARTICLES AND DEPARTMENTS** ★ ★

20 QUESTIONS SCIENCE QUIZ **The Editors** 86

AMAZING SCIENCE ADVENTURES 87

Through the curtain of tomorrow, with the science of today!

THE TEST TUBE **The Editors** 99

UNDER THE LENS **Letters From Our Readers** 127

VOL. 3 NO. 2 ★ **ALL BRAND NEW STORIES!** ★ **FEBRUARY, 1951**

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His hand gripped her ankles, and together they shattered the brilliant vells of light!

CHAPTER I

REINACH knew desperate fear. He had never known fear before. Reinach's strong hands gripped the control bar of his gyrojet until the knuckles shown white as polished bone. In the sky for relaxation, the cruise had ended

suddenly with a feeling of lostness, of unutterable loneliness.

This is how a human must feel, he thought, when he's afraid.

Above Reinach's large blond head, through the hurtling plane's plastex cowl, the stars shown frostily clear and cold. Below him, the lights of New Washington

WHY HAD IT COME? SIMPLY TO AMUSE ITSELF? SIMPLY BECAUSE IT HAD NO CONSCIENCE, NO MORALS? . . . A STARTLING BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL BOUND TO BE THE SCIENCE-FICTION SENSATION OF THE YEAR!

THE MAN



Unlike many of his kind, Reinach liked humans. He felt a certain kinship with them, even though they were far, far down the grey trail of evolution. In any case, he certainly didn't want war with them. But it *did* want the war, and that of course was all that mattered. Not for any particular reason that Reinach could comprehend. It was likely just curious. It was quite amoral, cared not at all about the effects of its probing. For it, the awful, cataclysmic war would be nothing more than an incident, a mildly diverting incident

shown colder still, like reflections in a lake of ice.

I feel almost human, thought Reinach. This uncertainty, this aloneness. This must be all too human. And humans, long ago under the old systems, had been known to go insane when they felt like this.

But his kind could never go insane. He was one of the Higher Men. He was a member of the secret organization of mutated humans. He was a metamorphosed human. Which simply meant that he wasn't human at all.

He was a secret member of the Rhine Institute of Extra Sensory Perception. There were 25,000 members of the Rhine ESP Institute, and they were all like him, and he was like them, mass thought, group unity; a secret group that the humans thought were human, too. The humans had assumed the ESP Institute to be a new religious cult; they had accepted it as such. They didn't know what it really was—a facade, a disguise to protect the Higher Men from the inevitable murderous, jealous wrath of the humans if the ESP should be discovered for what it really was.

If the Higher Men were exposed, there would be a bloody pogrom. Humans hated and distrusted what they didn't understand, anything that seemed alien.

Reinach's blood curdled with fear. If they had not been discovered, then what had happened to Marl?

He had sent out wave after wave of telepathic projection. And for the first time in their existence, Marl's mind had failed to respond. He hadn't even been able to find her mind! That was inconceivable. It just didn't happen. Marl Baur and Ric Reinach's minds had been like one mind too long, much too long, to be severed without some cause dreadful to contemplate.

Marl! Marl! Marl Baur! Where are you? Why don't you answer?

Wild emptiness fled through the

cerebral maze of his mind. Cold and crusted with fear, his neural bands ached with the strain. The jets throbbed with a soft susurrant, as Reinach plunged the gyrojet downward toward the rooflanding of the big science building in the heart of Science Square.

There could be only one explanation for her not responding: her brain was either utterly unconscious, or—dead. And either possibility meant a very abnormal cause. The only such cause Reinach could think of was—human. When and where the humans found out about the Higher Men, they would kill!

Reinach's body leaped with his inhuman agility out of the plane even as it clicked into the gravtrac runway. His shadow was rapier thin as it preceded him through the brilliant moonlight across the rooflanding. Reinach's eyes were bright, burning with supernal fire, as he ran.

If Marl had suffered from human hands! Then he, Reinach, would kill. It was forbidden by the Institute, but if Marl had suffered—many humans would feel the untapped power of his brain. Kill? He was distraught.

A SMALL bright gleam of white light stabbed into his face. Reinach crouched silently, peering at a straight shadowed form behind the probing beam, the white anxious face of a Blue Guard.

"Identification check," the Blue Guard said—rather nervously, Reinach thought.

"When did this new regulation start?" asked Reinach. He tried to seem calm, though down there in the Psychometry Labs where Marl and he worked as lab assistants to Velescon, the Chief Psychometry expert of New Washington, Marl Baur might be dead, or dying.

The Blue Guard said apologetically, "Just came from Headquarters. Everyone must be identified."

Reinach bared his wrist for the Guard's ultra-violet prober. Beneath its invisible ray, his identification

marks appeared deep in the flesh of his arm. The Blue Guard nodded for him to pass. Reinach hesitated. "Why?" he asked. "What is the purpose of this order?"

"Don't know exactly," the Guard said. "There's been a series of mysterious attacks on the mentalities of leading scientific minds. Here in Science Square, during the past hour, a number of top scientists have gone insane."

Reinach backed away, his lips twitched slightly. His stomach tightened with that insidious fear. He threw all his non-human power into the integration effort necessary to maintain orientation.

Horribly incredible. Insanity! There had been no cases of any extreme psychosis for almost a hundred years. It was more than mere coincidence, of course, that pathology had struck a great number almost at one time—and the plague had struck only the top scientific minds!

They would be isolated for life under the law of Martian Exile for all cases of pathology, regardless of kind. Since the atom war and the new Systems, society took no chances; all efforts to cure them had been abandoned. They constituted too great a danger to society. They were isolated on Mars to live in the ancient extinct Martian cities. Abandoned there, and forgotten almost, except for occasional field surveys.

And these scientists would be no exception. That law was definite, immutable as were all social laws in the new Systems.

And in this building, something had also happened to Marl's mind. But she couldn't develop any form of insanity. Reinach, charging through the panel leading into the the levitation shaft, stumbled over an abrupt thought.

The Higher Humans, the ESP Institute, might be responsible for the mental attacks! Yet, that would have been impossible to have been arrived at as a course of action against the humans without him, Reinach, knowing it. But there was something—

Reinach ran with a burst of furious swiftness down the tubular hall. His fingers pressed a stud; the door into Velescon's main office where Marl worked, slid open. Reinach threw himself into the great domed room.

Shock sawed into his brain, bound-ed down those intricate corridors like germs of frolicking madness.

He stood, looking at Velescon. A Velescon he hardly recognized. The Psychometry Chief's face was deathly white. His greying hair was mussed, his pastoid working smock twisted.

And blood glittered evilly as it ran down from a cut on his face, dripped to the chrome surface of his desk. Reinach said hoarsely: "What's happened, Velescon?" and started forward, then stumbled to one side, felt his muscles knot as he saw her body stretched lifelessly on the floor. "Marl!" His eyes saw the antique knife on the floor which Velescon had kept on his desk among other curios. Humans loved their past, unreasonably.

The knife's long sharp blade was red stained. Red as the cracked clay of the Martian plains. Red like the glaring eyes of insanity.

Velescon's voice was harsh. "It was Marl. For the love of logic, Reinach, what's happening? I felt something, some terrible power, something invisible; in this room. Marl acted strangely. I was afraid, for the first time I can remember. Everything blurred, misted away. I felt pain. I regained consciousness about a half an hour ago. I haven't told any one else. I've been trying to find out—"

Reinach stood above her. He stood there trembling inwardly, trying to understand. He shook his head.

"Yes," said Velescon. "She must have used the knife on me. She has developed a sudden and complete pathology, Reinach, like the others."

"No!" almost shouted Reinach. "Not—" He stopped; he had almost said "not US." Now, of all times, the humans must not find out about

the true nature of ESP Institute members. Now there would be an investigation of Marl unless he could prevent it. If her body were put through the examination Wards, her nonhuman structure would certainly be discovered!

"IMPOSSIBLE," he said. And it was, too. One of the Higher Men couldn't develop any known type of insanity. They had almost perfect control of the nervous system and consciousness. He felt her pulse. He knew part of the answer then.

"When did this happen, Velecon?"

"About an hour ago." Velecon's eyes probed Reinach's face with shrewd scrutiny. *He suspects, thought Reinach. He knows. But how—?*

"You love her, Reinach." Velecon walked to his side. "Listen. Don't try to hide anything from me. I've already examined her. I've given her a quick, general check-up with the probers. Something very peculiar about her body structure, Reinach. It must tie in somehow. Yet, I'm no mystic. I—"

"She had nothing to do with these attacks," said Reinach.

"But the attacks are caused by something," said Velecon wearily. "Maybe I'm just imagining that force or whatever it was. I probably just suffered a temporary, or even preliminary, attack of insanity myself. Maybe it's only a natural thing," he said with a crooked smile, "for scientists to go insane. Anyway, Reinach, regardless of the mental attacks, there's something about Marl's physical structure. I can't believe it! It's frightening somehow. Why, she's hardly human, really!"

"I hadn't noticed," said Reinach tightly. He blocked out panic. If Velecon had given her an emergency check, then he already knew about Marl. He was just trying to get Reinach to commit himself. He heard the Psychometry Chief say slowly, deliberately:

"I didn't call in the staff, Reinach. I didn't want anyone else to

know I'd talked with you. This is too dangerous to take chances with. I like you, respect your fine mind. You've always been like a son to me, and I trust you. I thought you might want to explain to me first. For God's sake, Reinach—tell me what she really is!"

CHAPTER II

REINACH turned slowly. His grey eyes shown with abnormal brilliance as they looked steadily into Velecon's. The Psychometrist blinked, stepped back.

"What she really is, Velecon? What do you mean?" He could use telepathic projection, change all Velecon's attitudes, but first he had to find out what Velecon's attitudes were.

The Psychometrist glanced uneasily at Marl's apparently lifeless figure. His eyes went to the electroencephalograph screen on the wall, studied the lines of thought tracings, brain-waves, making jagged lines across its tri-dimensional plane. He looked at the electro-X-rayograph. Reinach knew that he had used both probers on Marl!

Velecon withdrew a number of foggy plates from the X-rayograph. His hand trembled as he held them in front of Reinach.

"An enlarged heart, and a radical alteration in the nervous system. The cables of nerves, the association fibers connecting the thalamus with the pre-frontal lobes are completely outside any human norm, Reinach. And you pretend that you never knew those facts?"

Reinach nodded. Velecon pointed to the brain-wave screen again. "Those tracings," he said. "They don't indicate any form of psychopathology. Yet, her attack on me certainly indicates some form of cerebral distortion. There—those final tracings, Reinach! Her mental pulse rate kept lessening until there was no perceptible brain-waves registering at all! She isn't really dead—but her brain has stopped functioning entirely!"

Reinach's superior highly integrated mentality functioned with lightning speed and surety. Something had entered this room and attacked both Marl and Velecon. Something invisible, Velecon had said. Something gigantic.

And Reinach began to realize then that it wasn't some super telepathic emanation of his own kind, the Higher Men exercising group thought. The force was something else. Something alien, perhaps; or it could be some diabolic human attack, though he doubted that. Humanity was too well integrated in their socio-economic stability now. But something had caused those other insanity attacks, and this horror that had occurred where it never should have, in this office in the heart of Science Square!

And whatever it was, it had attacked Marl, too.

Reinach recognized her state. Though even Velecon could not conceive of what she had done to escape and protect herself against this mysterious attacking force. All the Higher Men had that faculty. Complete control of the nervous system and consciousness. The ability to contract the amoeboid dendrites of the neurones and break the synaptic connections. Marl had made this neural disconnection, thrown herself into a state of voluntary anesthesia, to escape the mysterious "force", whatever it might be.

She had buried herself so far down in the unfathomable abyss of her own mental deeps that not even this unknown, invisible force could penetrate. That was Reinach's reasoning. It was an error, partly. The beginning of a number of errors for Reinach.

"Are you like her, friend?" asked Velecon with almost a pleading tone. "If you are, please explain what you are, and if any of your kind are responsible for this series of attacks. What side are you on, Reinach? Are you on our side, the human side, or are you with—the other—whatever it is?"

Reinach started to answer. But Velecon interrupted with a ragged scream of pure horror. "It's coming

back, Reinach. Feel it? It's coming back, *after me!*"

Reinach went down on his knees. Marl had fought it, retreated into anesthesia to escape it. Should he do the same? Through a blurred mist he saw Velecon cowering in a far corner, his face a bulging mask of sheer horror.

He thought of sending out telepathic projection calls for help, but he was afraid of endangering more of his own kind. He couldn't contact Marl; she was buried in the depths of her anesthesia.

Reinach took the chance. He let the monstrous tendrils of the "thing's" power wriggle into his mind. He let it come in because he wanted to know what it was he was supposed to be fighting, what this "thing" was that was attacking scientific minds...

"We are Lolahr-amu."

IT WAS A thought in his mind. Reality had changed for Reinach. He was in a world of spinning monochromatic brilliance. Of almost unendurable ecstasy. Of illimitable vistas of soaring-colossi. It was overwhelming, crushing, fantastic beyond even the mass thought of the Higher Men's most profound dreaming.

We are Lolahr-amu. It was not a name. It was an impression, a particle of thought set to cosmic song.

We are Lolahr-amu.

It came from far beyond any nebulae then known to men. It had forgotten almost all of that time-lost past when It had been individual autonomous parts, before It had merged into a massive, collective intelligence.

It was unblemished group libido of indeterminate dimension. Pure thought, made up of photons, particles of force—though to define It would be possible only by being a part of It.

To It, dynamical and kinematical time were one, as was spacetime, the dimensions beyond the veil of human perception. It had known the center of the expanding Universe,

the young stars of non-radiating gaskugln. It had experienced galaxies and meta-galaxies. It fed directly upon extradimensional, subatomic energies. And It lived. It was ultimate life.

It was pure thought. It was a wanderer of infinity. And It had returned to this dim, far Solar System for a purpose that was inevitable. A blasting shock beat down, driving hard into Reinach's shivering brain.

Why had It come? It had a reason. He could not grasp the terrifying significance. Yet the reason was inevitable, cause and effect. Immutable scientific law.

Its fatal contact with high scientific intellects was only a passing phase, an incident. It was curious. It probed into those inferior, distorted minds with the tendrils of curiosity. It was amoral, and cared little about the effects of Its probing.

It was in no hurry. For It, there was no time. To those who had brought It here, time existed, and some of that narrow perspective was necessary to make the final linkage. Meanwhile, with the unconscious immediacy which It commanded, It departed from Earth. Mars, too, contained even more curiously distorted primate mentalities which it could examine until the linkage was complete.

We are Lolahr-amu.

REINACH crawled out of the overwhelming greyness of Its memory. A dull ache throbbled dangerously in his skull, like mad gongs in a bell. He had been able to contact Its thought because he was not human; yet he knew that even his ESP faculties had touched only the fringe of this Lolahr-amu's basic significance.

It was so alien to human concept that no human could even comprehend Its existence. But he, Reinach, knew of It. But he didn't know nearly enough. And the gap filled up quickly with black fear.

He turned toward the maddened sounds, stared at the source of the

whining and gabbling. Velescon hardly looked the same now. The recently great scientist crouched in his haunches, eyes staring, lips frothing, hands pawing the air.

Reinach stared quickly around him. He had to get Marl out of there, fast, and into one of the ESP Institute's secret hidaways. His neural bands groaned with the mental strain as he tried to contact her locked up mind. But he found nothing there where her warm intimate thoughts had always been.

At any moment, others might enter this room. The humans had assumed logically that they were under attack. But they couldn't possibly conceive of the true attacking force. A human mind contacting the Lolahr-amu simply made its only possible adjustment—temporary insanity, shock.

Only the Higher Men could recognize Its existence, and purpose. And now, if the Higher Men were discovered, they would naturally be the suspects. There would fall the bloody pogrom and war the ESP Institute had anticipated and averted for so long! And what if those findings of Velescon's were—

Reinach's eyes shifted in sudden icy suspicion. Those machines projected all their findings automatically to the master machines in the Main Labs where the results were filed on tri-dimensional micrographs for further reference.

And if that had happened in this case, then the evidence for Marl's nonhuman structure was already in the hands of the Main Lab attendants!

They knew! The result of that knowledge was inevitable. The humans would jump to the one and, to them, only obvious conclusion. That the Mutants, whose existence had been unknown to them hitherto, and whose number was an inconceivable and frightening mystery, were responsible for those mental attacks. That those attacks constituted only the beginning of a vaster, all-out attack on the humans.

His mind was rushing ahead. He

understood human psychology. And unless the ESP Institute could somehow make the humans see the truth, the really responsible entity—already the Blue Guard Centers probably knew!

Reinach shuddered, spun nervously around. He hated to think about what would happen. Open war between the Higher Men and the humans. He, Reinach, would have to fight against humanity. He didn't want to do that. Unlike many of his kind, Reinach liked humans. He felt a certain kinship with them. The humans were far, far down the grey trail of evolution. Yet there was a strong paternal attachment.

Marl stirred. Her lithe strong body clad in plastoid shorts and bra, with jeweled sandals, and gleaming opals in her flood of blue-black hair, Marl shifted agilely, then suddenly sat up and looked at him.

A burst of joyous eagerness died in a hissing of air, as he stared into her swirling eyes. A blinding radiance shown there, such as he had never seen form any eyes before. He staggered back, his own eyes shut. When he opened them again, the strange brilliance was gone. He decided that he must only have imagined it.

For the first time since that terrible moment when he had been unable to contact her neural circuit, mental rapport flooded between them once again. He knew the magnificent loving intimacy of her thoughts. An intimate shivering warmth no human could even conceive of.

There were sounds from the sonic disk on Velescon's desk. Three men were approaching down the corridor outside.

"We've got to escape." Her sudden thought was vibrant, intense. "The humans know about us. They will start a pogrom. We've got to get out of here, Ric! It's destiny this time. The final destiny."

Reinach turned, faced the door. How did she know the things he had only suspected? She knew about

the humans, and the fact that they were starting a pogrom against the Mutants.

But if she had been in a state of complete, voluntary anesthesia, then how did she know? Somehow, that seemed more important to Reinach than the fact that there were 25,000 Higher Men facing annihilation at the hands of the humans. And with the only alternative, a bloody slaughter, a war of racial father and son. Was that the destiny she spoke of so ecstatically?

The footsteps paused outside the door. In the far corner, Velescon babbled on, his hands writhing in the air, his eyes wide with horror.

CHAPTER III

REINACH could feel the indecision of the three labmen outside the door. They were debating as to what sort of approach to use against—they hesitated to define what those master machines had found in Marl's physical structure.

Marl's eyes concentrated on the door. Reinach studied her, wandringly, a little frightened of her, though he did not know why. She had always been so silent, so considerate and mild, but now she was the antithesis of mildness. She seemed aggressive, powerful, and somewhat of a stranger.

"They're afraid of us," her thoughts told Reinach. "It will be easy to deal with three of them."

"We'll make our way up to the rooflanding, fly to the central ESP Institute," thought Reinach. "Maybe the humans don't suspect that the ESP Institute is really our organization yet."

"Perhaps not," she thought. Her eyes found his. "You know, Ric, about the visitor, the Lolahr-amu?"

He nodded. "I know a little about it. I contacted only the barest periphery of it."

"I—I had to assume anesthesia to contact it entirely. I had to divorce my mind almost completely from my body, Ric. For a while, I thought perhaps my body had died. And—I

felt a new, a glorious freedom. Listen, Ric, the Lolahr-amu is the final evolutionary form. And we're not too distant from it. That's our goal! And if we could only—"

Reinach interrupted. *"But Velescon said you went insane, that you attacked him with the knife."*

"You should know better than that, Ric," she scolded. "Velescon did it himself. The Lolahr-amu barely touched him at first. Just the merest contact with it drove Velescon into that momentary schizophrenia. He recovered but when the entity returned in all its colossal force—" She shrugged.

She looked at him with silent, burning intensity. *"You know why it came here, Ric? I know. It's pure ESP, pure thought. We have only the beginning of ESP, but the Lolahr-amu is its final form. It came to us because it knew about us. It sensed our ESP wherever it was in the vastness of the Universe which to It is not vast at all. It sensed us with the awareness of the Universality of ESP which is immediate, timeless, and—"*

Reinach felt surging impotent hurt and rage. *Why hadn't he known all this. Why. Why?*

The panel slid open and the three labmen in white plastoid smocks stood uncertainly in the ovoid frame. Reinach faced them with mingled feelings of hate, and remorse, love and sullen guilt. These labmen were very human, they resembled him outwardly. Yet they were far down the evolutionary scale. But they had spawned him, with the help of hard radiation during the atom war. He owed them a debt, for they had given birth to him in mind-reeling pain.

But when is a debt of the conscience ever paid?

The trio's eyes found the body of Velescon staring idiotically at them from his corner. Their eyes darkened with fear and rage. Reinach knew two of them, Carlo and Burlen; had seen the other around. Mechanistic minded scientists, shocked, uncertain from the sudden realization that their well-regulated

civilization was undermined with infiltrated aliens, non-humans. They didn't know how to proceed; they were afraid. And reading their confused thought processes, Reinach knew that they suspected the Mutants of having launched the mental attacks which had frightened the entire world.

But they were calm enough. The large blond man, Burlen, said, "We know what you are. We know you must have many abilities that we can only guess at. You can probably overpower us, but it would be better for all concerned if you gave yourselves up peacefully. Let us not fight, you two. Call on your kind, tell them not to cause conflict. Another atomic war, between us, it will mean the end for us all. Humans and —non-humans—alike."

"Hypnosis." Reinach heard the suggestion in his mind. *"Don't use violence against them, Ric, yet. Wait for Mass Communion. We must all act as a unit with definite plans. Wait until we have Mass Communion."*

Reinach jerked involuntarily. Don't use violence, yet. She seemed to assume that the Higher Men would use violence. When? How? Why should such horror be necessary. Why didn't he know?

They used hypnotic projection.

WITH SUDDEN instinctive alarm, the trio stared into Reinach's and Marl's blazing eyes.

"It's time you took us up to the rooflanding and sent us on our way, isn't it, Burlen?" asked Reinach easily.

Dully, with dazed tones, Burlen said, "Yes. It's time."

The other two nodded. "Where was it now you were to go," said Burlen. "I've forgotten." His big square face twisted with inner conflict.

"That special assignment," said Reinach. "They might suspect us and cause some delay. Your word will be enough, if you simply tell the Blue Guards we're being sent to

Central Psychometry headquarters to take those last reports over. You know, the reports!"

"Oh yes! Sure, sure, the reports!" said Burlen. "Let's go! Those reports are urgent." Reinach and Marl followed them down the tubular hall.

"What reports?" asked Carlo, puzzled. "I don't remember—"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Burlen.

Carlo walked on stiffly, like an automaton.

The party paused in the exit leading into the rooflanding. Outside, the big public audio was blaring its sensational message from North American Blue Guard Sector Five, via headquarters:

THE SUDDEN MYSTERIOUS ATTACKS ON LEADING SCIENTIFIC MINDS OF THIS SECTOR HAS BEEN EXPLAINED AND ACTION TAKEN. THE DISCOVERY OF AN UNDETERMINABLE NUMBER OF MALIGNANT MUTANTS, DETAILS OF WHICH WERE RELEASED IN AN EARLIER DISPATCH, HAS LED TO A MILITANT PROGRAM OF APPREHENSION IN WHICH EVERY CITIZEN MUST PLAY AN INDIVIDUAL PART.

EVERYONE IS CAUTIONED TO BE ON THE ALERT, THOUGH THERE IS NO OUTWARD METHOD OF DETERMINING A MUTANT FROM A HUMAN PHYSIOLOGY. ANY SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY MUST BE REPORTED IMMEDIATELY TO YOUR LOCAL GUARD SECTOR CONTROL OFFICES.

DUE TO THE FIRST AGGRESSIVE ACTION HAVING BEEN LAUNCHED BY THESE MALIGNANT BEINGS, A STATE OF CONFLICT IS DECLARED TO EXIST PENDING FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS TO DE-

TERMINE FACTS.

ALL MEMBERS OF THE ESP INSTITUTE ARE TO REPORT TO THEIR LOCAL PSYCHOMETRIC COUNCIL FOR PSYCHO-EXAMINATIONS IMMEDIATELY. FAILURE TO DO SO WILL RESULT IN SAID INSTITUTE MEMBERS BEING LIABLE TO ARREST, AND IF THEY RESIST ARREST—DEATH.

Reinach's thought was urgent. *Marl. We've got to have a Mass Communion and quickly! We've got to commune with the others as soon as possible!*

She agreed. The trio of labmen stood there stiffly, leaning forward staring into the frosty night.

"Those reports are important," reminded Reinach. "Let's go."

"Yes. We must hurry," stuttered Burlen, as he led them outside. A Blue Guard stopped him, demanded identification. Burlen complied. "Listen, let's drop this formality. This is really urgent business! These two have secret reports that must be flown to Central Headquarters immediately."

The Blue Guard nodded. Nevertheless he checked their identification coloration with his ultra-violet meter. Then he motioned them ahead. A small sleek gyrojet coasted to their position down its grav-track runway.

Marl climbed inside; Reinach started to follow. An officer came running toward them. He was waving a small deadly neutron pistol in one hand.

"Stop them! Stop there, you two! Or I'll fire!"

Reinach looked at him.

Reinach's eyes glowed peculiarly in the semidark. The Officer stumbled, sagged a little. He stood there, staring in perplexity at the neutron gun now hanging limply in his hand.

"What's the matter, sir," asked the Blue Guard uneasily, looking uncertainly from one to the other. "Their identification is legal

enough sir."

"Why...why nothing's wrong," stammered the Officer, his face twitching. "I must have made a mistake. Yes, I did. I thought these two were somebody else, I guess. Still, remember that we can't be too cautious now. You can't tell who's liable to be an—ah—mutant, as they say, or how they'll act. Though personally I think this mutant business is so much sensational hokum. Well, sorry you two. Accept my sincere apologies."

Reinach nodded with a grim smile, got in the gyrojet. He sent it plunging upward into the darkness.

AS THE small fast ship pierced the upper dark, Reinach didn't try to commune with Marl. He stayed inside his own tortured self and tried to understand. There was so much to understand, yet there didn't seem to be anyplace to really start. All he wanted was to feel that same rapport with Marl's mind that he had had for so long, but which he had so abruptly lost. But would that old rapport ever return?

A few minutes away, at supersonic speed, lay the huge glittering structure of the main ESP Institute. Humanity had always considered it as merely the expression of a new form of religious mysticism. They knew the truth now, or part of it. Being human, they could never comprehend its entirety.

Reinach finally spoke, with a tinge of bitterness in his voice. It actually seemed, somehow, easier to communicate verbally with Marl now, than telepathically. And that was wrong, so wrong!

"Marl, before we go on, tell me—what's happened between us? Our rapport is gone. And between our kind, that's wrong. How did you know so much about this Lolahr-amu, that I couldn't know? How—"

For what seemed too long, her face was a cold white silence. Then she said. "I don't know, Ric, yet. Things aren't the same now. Maybe they'll never be the same again, now that the Lolahr-amu has found us. There's a change now that we could

never have anticipated."

"But why should this Lolahr-amu make so much difference?"

"It's here—for us, Ric. It came seeking through the Universe for us. We belong to it, and it to us. Even the first clumsy experiments with ESP by the Great Rhine proved that it is a cosmic phenomenon—that it's timeless, measureless, a basic force commanding all space-time. The Great Rhine proved that ESP communication was as instantaneous at hundreds of miles as it was at a few feet, and that it was temporal as well as spatial. And it's the same if the distance is billions of light years—the sending and the receiving can be an almost instantaneous act."

Reinach tried to grasp the gigantic significance. He felt lonely, frantic with cold lostness. *How can she know these things, he thought? if I don't know. I contacted this—this Lolahr-amu—yet I wasn't moved to a greater fusion with it. Why is this?*

Her eyes shown with a strange burning flame. "Can't you see why IT came to us? It knew we were here, waiting for it to come to us. Our fused ESP potential found it wherever it was with the immediacy of ESP, and guided it here. The final goal, Ric—ALL ESP that develops throughout all the entropic Universe will fuse into one vast perfect unity of final purity—"

Her eyes closed. She trembled with vague terrifying revelation. Reinach shivered as though from a cold and merciless wind.

I feel lonely, he thought with shocked surprise. Lonely! I, a Higher Man! No member of ESP should feel loneliness in the presence of another. Where is the warmth of her mind?

"You see how completely inhuman we are, Ric? The best human mentality cracks when it contacts Lolahr-amu. Yet we are in sympathy with it. We must escape our bodies; we're trapped in gross flesh, the animal prisons of our past, Ric. And we must escape!"

"But, Marl. I don't understand. If

you—"

Further conversation was drowned out by that for which they had been waiting. It was Mass Communion.

THE ECSTASY flowed over them—a warm, moist flood of complete ESP unity. The reality around them ceased to be. Tidal waves of surging mutuality filled up those gaping holes of loneliness. It was a reeling symphony of pure thought no human could ever know.

And as a part of the Communion came the Directives, spontaneous evaluation and conclusions formed by the complex neural circuits of 25,000 super human organisms, acting as one. Every Higher Man was to hide in his local underground Presidium. Marl and Reinach and a few other Higher Men in the vicinity of the ESP Institute were to proceed there immediately. A number of records were in the Institute which had to be obtained and destroyed. Secret documents containing histories, plans, names, of the Higher Men.

They were to get there with all possible speed. At that very moment, military robot planes, loaded with atomic bombs were heading for the ESP Institute, and the records which had to be destroyed were far beneath the Institute's surface structure in vaults that the bomb would not touch. Searching through the ruins after the explosion, the Blue Guards might find the records. But by then, the Higher Men might not be in a position to act.

And then the mass thought reached the conclusion that made the entire episode seem the figment of some monstrous nightmare. Reinach alone, none of them alone, might have reached that conclusion. But as a result of mass potential, Reinach knew what was imminently possible.

The total destruction of Earth. The possible destruction of the Earth beneath the ghastly raining of atomic missiles. The danger of the Earth becoming a new Nova, a white-hot sun flaming its hideous message across the void.

Yet, now that the conclusion was drawn, how logical and inevitable it was, thought Reinach as the gyrojet hurtled through the high darkness.

The facts:

A hundred of the greatest scientists on Earth had been stricken with cerebral aberration.

The immutable post-atomic war law dealing with insanity had to be employed with those scientists the same as with any other citizen stricken with insanity. That law was—*Martian Exile!*

Capital punishment was no longer applicable; it had been outlawed.

For the past five hundred years all forms of insanity, including the dread disease known as *Fascio-paranoia*, had been sent on a one-way exile trip to Mars. Mars was an ancient, exhausted planet good for little else.

But the pathological types sent there had organized into a functioning social culture, whipped into shape, controlled by the *Fascio-paranooids*. For mad though the *Fascio-paranooids* were, with their impossible delusions of grandeur and dreams of conquest, their methods, as with all *paranooids*, were feindishly logical. Their ultimate purpose—to conquer the Universe.

But until now, the *Fascio-paranooid* exiles of Mars had had only their mad deluded dreams of military glory. They had not the necessary means to bring their dreams to fruition. They hadn't the scientific means to perfect atomic power, atomic weapons.

But those one hundred scientists stricken with insanity—they had the knowledge. Their ranks included atomic and nuclear physicists, electronics engineers, psychometric experts.

And because the Law of *Martian Exile* for cerebral aberration was immutable, and because even if the necessary legislation to alter that law was thrown into motion it would take months of red tape to make the alteration acceptable, those scientists were being shipped on a one-way trip to Mars.

If those scientists' minds were only temporarily affected by insanity. If their sanity should return after exile.

They would be mental slaves of the Fascio-Paranoid civilization of Mars! And only the Higher Men knew that their insanity was only temporary.

And very soon that Fascio-paranoid civilization would be able to launch an atomic war against the Earth which it hated and which had started their exile five hundred years before.

Only the Higher Men knew that those Scientists might be suffering from only temporary insanity. For only the Higher Men knew the cause. But they could not act. They were being hunted. Hunted like some new and evil species of beast.

The Higher Men had great powers. They had had a plan for making themselves acceptable to the humans. But this was catastrophe that had happened too fast to be dealt with. They had to go underground, hide like rats.

And they also had to stop the Fascio-paranoids of Mars from utilizing the minds of the hundred scientists being exiled there because of insanity.

Reinach smiled bitterly as he plunged the gyrojet earthward.

Ten Higher Men were selected to volunteer, disguised as pathological humans, for Martian Exile, in an effort to curb the Fascio-Paranoids. Selected for expediency of location and opportunity, Marl and Reinach were among the accepted group.

They managed to get in the vaults beneath the Institute, get the records and burn them. They barely escaped the atomic bombs.

CHAPTER IV

THEY LOOKED back to where the remnants of the great fission were fading in a sea of billowing smoke. Beyond it the sun was rising through a cloud of flame.

Marl's lips gleamed wetly. Her black eyes blazed. Reinach was sad,

knowing the great Institute was gone. Marl's eyes followed the distant flight of the robot planes. *We must follow them now, Ric. If we're going to give ourselves up today, we must act now.*

Thoughtlessly, Reinach sent the gyrojet hurtling away through heavy morning clouds toward New Washington.

Having complete control of their nervous systems and consciousness, the ten who had volunteered would give themselves up to the authorities, disguised as humans with mental aberrations. They could fake paranoia easily enough. They could also, it was planned, prevent being checked for possible mutational characteristics in the Psychometric examining wards. It was obvious that if they were found to be mutants, they wouldn't be shipped on a one-way exile trip to Mars. Not being human they wouldn't fall under the exile laws applying to aberrated humans.

They would probably be executed.

The Higher Men couldn't fail. Upon these ten depended, perhaps, the fate of the Earth.

More important, the fate of all the Higher Men who live there, and must survive.

being shipped there by a law-en-

Employing those scientific minds slaved human system, the Fascio-paranoical culture of Mars could, within a few months, have enough lethal weapons and ships, utilizing basic energy, to destroy Earth's civilization, if not the Earth itself—and the Higher Men, too.

"And that's the important thing, isn't it, Marl?" projected Reinach. *"Humanity doesn't matter. We must save ourselves. That's the important thing."*

"Of course," she thought. *"Humanity's served its purpose. It made us possible. They must die anyway. They are beasts with the vague dreams of Gods. Dreams that cannot materialize."*

Reinach landed the gyrojet in a small clearing surrounded by trees.

They walked through the early morning clarity toward a monorail station, and caught one of the tear-shaped projectiles into New Washington.

They walked along a crowded walkway, waiting for an opportune moment to put their plan into effect. There was no necessity to actually assault anyone physically. Their powers of suggestion were enough.

They chose the two unsuspecting pedestrians whom they were intending to use as proof of their non-existent paranoia, and then said goodbye.

Reinach took her hands in his own and held them with an almost desperate passion. "*Marl, Marl don't forget me, if something should happen.*"

Her eyes flashed. "*Don't reveal such weakness, Ric. Don't you forget either—that you're a Higher Man. Sometimes you seem to forget that. Remember, nothing can happen now—except what we want to happen.*"

"*You seem so certain Marl. How can you be so sure?*"

"*We're going to Mars.*" she thought, her face suddenly glowing with an ecstasy his probing mental fingers could not reach. "*And have you forgotten?—the Lolahr-amu. is there. Why it's there, I don't know. But soon we'll be there, too, with the Lolahr-amu. Our final destiny. Ric.*"

She left him, following her intended victim. Reinach shivered. What did she mean—"our destiny?"

He saw the commotion then as the man Marl was following suddenly began screaming madly, jumping up and down pointing at Marl. Dimly, he heard the man's frantic cries.

"She's an insane one. She tried to kill me. She tried to choke me. Grab her—help!"

Marl hadn't touched him of course. Merely a projected hypnotic suggestion.

A LITTLE wearily, but with rising excitement at the incredible adventure opening for him, Reinach turned and focused his

mental radiations on the little bald man standing there innocently waiting for a gyro-taxi. The little man dropped a plastic shopping bag. He began to struggle with an unseen enemy. His hands grasped his throat, tore away imaginary fingers. He stepped back, gasping, face a dark red. His eyes bulged with horror. No insanity for one hundred years. Then a sudden plague of it. And men feared it more than man had ever feared any plague. Once before, mental aberration had led mankind to the very brink of final disaster.

His voice bleated pitifully as he pointed shaking fingers at Reinach. Reinach heard his voice but promptly forgot the little man as many hands siezed him. Blue Guards appeared quickly, efficiently.

They held him, one on either side. Every eye studied him with loathing, fear, curiosity, as he was taken through the mob and loaded into a Guardcar. All the way to the Central Psychometric institute, he worked on their minds. When they arrived, he was immediately locked up in a small cubicle that was completely naked of any furnishings or openings. As far as the Guards were concerned he was an extremely violent case of advanced paranoia.

A psychometric official appeared, his face filling a small opening revealed by a sliding panel. Quizzical little eyes studied Reinach. Reinach got into his mind quickly, held him there while he piled on evidence of his own insanity, advanced paranoia. Delusions of grandeur and of persecution. Dreams of conquest. "I'm a super-man," finished Reinach. "And someday my kind shall rule the Universe."

The psychometry official's mind strained, tried to resist the suggestion. Sweat stood out in a sheen of effort on his high forehead.

You know that I attacked Velescon with a knife, suggested Reinach. At first I was suspected of being a member of the ESP Institute, a Mutant. That was an error, wasn't it?

"Yes," after a long hesitation.

"Yes that was an error."

As though he were thinking it instead of Reinach, thoughts appeared in the writhing, balking mazes of the scientist's mind. "Yes, it was an error. Still we shall give your physical structure a going over to determine whether or not—oh—oh no, of course not, that won't be necessary; I've already given you a thorough physical check-up haven't I. I'd forgotten about that. Must be getting a little absent minded; overwork, no doubt. Well, you're obviously not a mutant, and it's equally obvious that you're in a highly advanced state of paranoia. I must recommend immediate shipment to Mars. For a hundred years, no mental aberration. Now, suddenly, three ships loaded and to be sent to Mars immediately. It was too damned good to last."

The panel closed. Reinach had been successful. There would be no examination of his physiology now. The official had just been convinced that he had already examined him. Now there only remained the waiting for exile.

As he waited, he sent out his ESP projection, searching, trying to understand. But the general picture of the situation remained unchanged. The ten Mutants who had volunteered for exile to Mars in order to prevent the Fascio-paranoids from utilizing the exiled scientists to their own insane ends, had succeeded a hundred percent.

The other Higher Men, didn't feel nearly so high now. They were safe enough, temporarily, buried in their underground hideaways. Powerful as they were, and superior to the individual human as they were, still they were helpless. By exercising their power they might make great strides in a quick all-out assault against human culture; but there would be mistakes, unforeseeable chance events that would decimate their ranks slowly, inevitably.

GIVEN TIME, they could penetrate the minds of the U.N. Council that decided all World is-

suces as far as final legislature was concerned. That had been part of their long range plan that had been so drastically interrupted. Now, they needed time. The first step must be the eradication of the fascio-paranoid menace on Mars.

Reinach smiled thinly to himself in the lonely barren cubicle. Humanity and their rigidly-worshiped, implacable laws. Made for their own protection, yet how they insisted on clinging to their laws—long after they became obvious liabilities.

But then they were not rational. How could they be? They were human.

During the mass communions that followed as he waited for exile to Mars, Reinach learned that a special investigation had been launched to probe out the mutants. A special Blue Guard was being trained for this task. Special machinery was being perfected to detect the special mental faculties of the Higher Men. *They might succeed, too, mused Reinach. If they are given time.*

Two ships had already departed for Mars loaded with insane scientists. The third and last ship was scheduled to leave within a few hours. The first ship had already arrived on Mars, and even now the Fascio-paranoids had those scientific minds, insane or not, in their power to exploit to their own deluded advantage. To be coerced as only the Fascios could coerce.

The ships had no pilots, no crew. They were entirely automatic in take-off, flight, and landing. A highly intricate mass of relays, electronic controls. With just sufficient drive-fission for that one-way trip. But with scientists there now—who understood nucleonics, fuel could be obtained for the return trip—utilizing the ships as war ships!

He would be helpless on the space ship. Whatever the Higher Men who were unsuspected passengers on that ship did to defeat any Fascio-paranoid plans to attack the Earth, would have to be accomplished after they reached Mars. Being automatic

in its entirety, it would be impossible to control the ship.

Having been secretarial assistant to Velescon, one of the key positions in the Higher Men's infiltration plan, Reinach knew enough about paranoia to continue his act when he was taken from the cubicle in the waiting wards and removed to the ship for transportation to Mars. He boasted that his capture was only temporary, that he was part of a cosmic destiny. That he was a Superman.

They laughed. Then, suddenly, before Reinach could resist, the medico-surgeon had stuck a needle into his arm. He was stripped of his clothing and provided with no others. He was locked in a small plastic cubicle. It was completely barren, except for the foam rubber matting which would ease the pressure of 4-g acceleration. *Why hadn't he anticipated the needle?*

He lay there on the foam rubber matting. And his consciousness faded. They had shot his veins full of hypnosene. He was to remain unconscious all during the space flight. A precautionary measure to prevent any possible suicide, or planned escape; for the paranoid mind was terribly logical once basic premises were decided, though the premise might be a delusion.

And even his non-human nervous system couldn't withstand the deadening effect of the hypnosene. Perhaps that was just as well, Reinach thought vaguely as he drifted off into soft grey emptiness, formless, a limitless expanse of floating mist in which there was no consciousness of anything other than soft, pleasant greyness. No past, no future. Only an ever present grey sea.

He contacted the other Higher Men in the ship briefly as his consciousness died. He was a part of Marl's mind for a while, part of that strangely cold withdrawn contemplation of Marl's mind. A strangeness, a blocked off world of her own which was increasingly frightful and awing to Reinach. He tried, he want-

ed to understand this woman who had loved him. Who still loved him. But a woman who had suddenly become to him a cold withdrawn stranger.

The grey sea induced by the hypnosene was almost welcomed for it released him from further attempts to understand the queer ramifications of Marl's mind.

Though, he mused as the last bit of weary consciousness died; it would put the Higher Men at a distinct disadvantage. They would arrive on Mars, the stronghold of Fascio-paranoia, in an unconscious, totally helpless physical and mental state.

Reinach's last conscious impression of reality was one of vague, festering fear. Fear of something he could not name, or feared to name.

CHAPTER V

REINACH stirred faintly. Reality was soft, formless, distant. Consciousness was returning in waves of dim impressions. Into his fogged ESP faculties wavering mental voices rose and fell on the growing sensitivity of his telepathic band. One of the Higher Men's thoughts came in, urgently.

"Marl, shall we leave him? Reinach—what was the matter with him? Why did he allow them to inject him with the hypnosene?"

"We mustn't leave him alone," Marl was thinking a desperate answer. "His reaction time was too slow to halt the injection move. But we must hurry. The ship's locks are opening. We've got to take Reinach with us. They're coming toward us now!"

"But, Marl, can't we deal with the Fascio-paranoids as they come aboard? By projected suggestion?"

"We don't know yet of course. Their minds are aberrated beyond any we've known. There's no way of determining how such distorted minds will react to our suggestions. We must escape from the ship before they reach it, and hide outside Olympus until we can plan our

movements against them."

Desperately, with a growing bitterness, Reinach fought against his helpless, inactive state. He tried to move, he still could not so much as lift a finger. His ESP faculties were dim. He called to the other Higher Men. Fearfully, he called. He hadn't been able to resist the hypnosene injection, because his temporal sense had not warned him in time of their intentions. But not so with the other Higher Men. He had been made helpless. Now he was a burden to the others.

Marl. Marl, he called, struggling with his dull sending neural bands. What's happened? Why didn't I—?

Relays clicked. The panel of his cubicle slid noiselessly open. His call wasn't answered. He heard one of the Higher Men telepath desperately.

The Fascio-paranoids are approaching the ship.... We must hurry. Hurry, Marl!

Through the grey mist, Reinach 'heard' Marl. *You leave the ship. All of you, understand. Hide somewhere along the Canal. Keep me informed as to your movements and location. Don't argue! Go quickly, now! I'll try to get Ric out of here!*

They complied. Reinach felt them as they ran through the ship's locks, and away from it. From their minds, he got a wavering impression of the surrounding Martian terrain. A rusty red plain of dry and dreary age. To the left, straight as a monstrous line, was the Central Canal. To the right towered the city of Olympus, built by the Martians, an extinct race that had probably been extinct for incomputable aeons. Their three gigantic cities still towered to the frigid skies, and cast their mysterious shadows over the exhausted lands.

Three sand-sleds were approaching the ship with great speed!

The thought impressions of the fleeing Higher Men died. Marl stood in the opening to his prison cubicle. He sensed her there, but he couldn't open his eyes.

Her thoughts were only slightly tinged with derogation. Love overbalanced her disgust for his unexplainable weakness in not anticipating the abrupt hypnosene injection.

Reinach thought weakly. *Leave me, Marl. Save yourself. The fate of the Earth is more important than mine.*

He felt the sudden intense flood of power flow from her. His body twitched, heaved upward with sudden life, fell back again into sweating pain.

They're in the ship now, Ric.... Concentrate all your cortical-thalamic faculties. Concentrate, Ric, with me!

Burning, rippling agony lanced through the straining circuits of his ESP bands. Molten flame blistered his bending neural circuits.

HE OPENED his eyes. He managed to reach his hands and knees, he raised one foot, got it beneath him. He felt her hands on his arms and then he was standing on his feet, swaying, his body a solid lump of twinging pain.

Marl twisted with a sudden tigerish movement of her slim body. They heard the thump, thump, thump of jack-booted feet on the mesh grid of the passageway.

A clipped nasal voice said sharply. "Soderman! You lead a detail through the lower deck, clean it out. We'll take this main deck. On the double!"

Behind Marl, then, Reinach saw the huge sluggish outline of the man. A cruel unemotional face with heavy jowls looked at him with but dim curiosity. A glittering purple uniform with gold and silver trappings. A sword swung at his side. A white-gloved hand motioned imperiously. "Take them, Jules. They all seem to be scientists of some sort, as on the other ship. Take them directly to the Mental Analysis Wards. On the double!"

A jack-booted guard, minus the glittering trappings, saluted. Three other purple uniformed hulks filled the passageway beyond Marl. They

stepped toward her.

She retreated. In her mind, Reinach felt pure and terrible hate. In greater command of his faculties now, Reinach eased forward toward the soldiers.

The leader barked in his sharp imperative manner. "No resistance, please. It is futile. Our Leader needs your minds to complete our predestined conquest of Earth and of the Universe. The Leader demands you. There is no recourse."

The man was a robot. These were all robots. Minds enslaved by the disease of fascio-paranoia, statism, leader-worship, all combined with delusions of grandeur and fanatical militaristic dreams. Fascio-paranoia the hereditary disease that had, again and again, caused earth's struggling civilizations to crumble beneath the onslaught of mad Leaders with paranoid followers.

And now, though isolated on a barren, exhausted world, they again threatened Earth with final extinction. And all because a pure ESP entity in a distant cosmos had come to Earth, attracted by the ESP emanations of the Higher Men, and had driven a few human scientific minds into temporary madness.

It had been known on Earth that the extreme fascio-paranoid minded who had been exiled on Mars had built up a Platonic civilization there utilizing the ancient three cities of the long-vanished Martians. The main city had been called Olympus, and was the city-state of The Leader and his militaristic oligarchy. Social evolution here had been inevitable. In this central city of Olympus population had increased rapidly. Perhaps a million, according to the last psychometric field survey, flourished in Olympus, a mechanistic slave-state. The ruling militaristic class ruled by divine right.

The other two cities and the central city was composed of a soldier class, a scientific class which hitherto had been of very limited capacity; and a big, fast-breeding slave class, chained to crude machines. All inculcated with the fixed idea that

their lives depended on The Leader, and his Purple Legions. They had been promised the Universe.

And there was no possible doubt in their deluded paranoid minds that they would not conquer the Universe. Now, like a gift from their pagan, bloody gods, Earth had thrown their best scientific minds to the fascio-paranoids to be drained of their knowledge.

Reinach sent out a sharp, probing question. *Marl, they're little more than beasts. Beasts with the mad dreams of gods. Let's attack now. What are we waiting for?*

Alright, she thought. We'll try. But I'm afraid of them. Ric. Their minds are too twisted. We can't practice any kind of suggestion we're familiar with. Be careful—

Reinach probed outward, dug rapidly into that cerebral cesspool of mad distorted fantasy. He felt Marl's consciousness suddenly floundering in helpless horror. He tried to retreat, but he seemed lost in a gigantic chamber of savage myth and monstrous legend.

Marl. We're trapped. There's nothing to work with. There's no logical beginning. Where—?

HE FOUGHT with the feral desperation of a caged animal. A gigantic shifting cage of winding labyrinths. A cobwebbed horror of mental aberration, with dusty grey pockets in which bloated flies swarmed, with glittering rainbow alternates of dazzling brilliance.

His probing ESP tendrils confused jumbles of shorted circuits as they met incomprehensible combinations of illogic and lust and murderous greed.

It was a hideous alien land of dim hulking shadows. Reinach screamed with mental anguish. He could not cope with it. It was too utterly beyond the pall of human decency and sanity. The brutal blood-seeking world of the fascio-paranoid where man was only an implement for conquest. A narrow grotesque nightmare land of towering shibboleths of

dancing maniacs, witches, sacrificial fires, pagan symbols and ferocious brutality.

Man is meat and blood. *Man is meat and blood.*

He was helpless to cope with the mind-reeling alienage. He could not escape the gory labyrinths, for his mind was too deeply entangled in that black, swirling tide of destruction.

There was only one way out.

Voluntary anesthesia. The Higher Men had that faculty, though few ever had had to employ it. He managed to find a fragment of her through the sluggish vile sludge of the diseased brain into which he had so inadvertently plunged. *Voluntary anesthesia, Marl! It's the only way!*

Yes, Ric. But act quickly, or we'll never find our way free!

Up to a point they had that complete control of the nervous system and consciousness. With pain-wracking effort, Reinach began the auto-activity necessary to contract the amoeboid dendrites of his neurones and break off all synantic connections. With that neural disconnection would come a complete state of esthesia into which no mental waves could ever reach.

If you can manage the anesthesia, Ric, stay in it! Stay in it until you know it's safe to renew your circuits!

Yes, Marl. Goodby—I love you, Marl. Remember that. In spite of the strange void. Remember me. Involuntarily he had said that once before. Remember me. Why? And then, for no reason, he thought again of that pure ESP entity that had come out of the void to precipitate this whole episode of crisis.
The Lolahr-Amu.

Remember me.

The Lolahr-Amu.

Remember me.

We are Lolahr-Amu.

With a gasp of ecstatic relief, solid blackness swept in, rolled him away in a cool, depthless tide. The mad moaning world of the Fascio-paranoid's mind blacked out as Reinach plunged his hurt conscious-

ness deep, deep down into the very dregs of his voluntary anesthesia.

His consciousness died. Only a small dim spark of it flickered down, far down, in the lonely depths of his thalamus. It was a vague, incredibly dim consciousness, yet it was life. It was a tightly-enclosed mental vault of armored resistance into which no force could probe and pry and peer.

When a propitious moment for renewal of his neural connections appeared, that one flickering thalamic threshold would be activated, and his consciousness would awake.

Until that indeterminable time, Reinach as a living conscious creature would no longer exist. His enemies would see him only as a strange, mysteriously living thing without mentality, without reaction. And their only way of dealing with him would be complete physical destruction. And that was of no consequence to Reinach; for all practical purposes, he had ceased to live.

CHAPTER VI

A SHARP high scream plunged into his soul like red hot steel. That dim threshold was being activated. Reinach was awakening. To what? To retching screams torn from ragged throats. To what horror—

A harsh voice, thick with frantic fear, tugged at his misty consciousness:

"Reinach! Reinach! You must hear me, Reinach! They are coming for me. *Reinach!*"

It was a sane voice. It was a familiar voice. *Velescon!*

Reinach opened his eyes. A dim sweating light glittered overhead. A stinking vapor clouded it like rheum over a diseased and yellow eye. A haggard hollow face peered down at him. Reinach cried out.

"*Velescon!* What have they done to you?"

Velescon smiled somehow, a weary, so weary, smile. "Everything possible—so far. They are going to kill you, Reinach. Their patience is exhausted. Nothing here in the men-

tal wards could penetrate your anesthesia. Nothing. So they are coming to destroy your body."

"Where's Marl?"

"In another ward down the hall. They intend to destroy her too. Both of you have caused the Fascios much annoyance. Fear, too, Reinach. All the scientists exiled here by those idiotic laws of Earth Council have been enslaved. I'm not supposed to be talking with you now. They hear me. They know. They know everything that happens among their crawling subjects. That exile law has created a monstrosity here, Reinach. It must be destroyed."

"Yes," said Reinach. He wondered how. He didn't mention the Lolahr-amu that had driven Velescon into temporary insanity and had gotten him exiled. There was no use discussing Lolahr-amu with a human. It was billions of years of evolution beyond any human comprehension.

Reinach turned his eyes, absorbed the scene and the situation in a flash of understanding. A torture chamber, beautifully pretending to be some sort of laboratory.

The exiled Fascio-paranoids had carried the ancient uniquely human art to torture to its finality. Reinach saw the grisly details. Gleaming expenses of equipment for the twisting and bending of the human mind. Screening metallic mesh of distorted electroencephalograph cages, with wracked bodies inside. Wall-screens ran jagged tracings of pain-twisted mental patterns. Hypnagogic ray-disks, oscillating before fixed faces of once-human shapes that screamed futilely against suggestion. Suggestions that contained lands of nightmare horror Reinach remembered only too well. Intricate beam-needle apparatus for parasitic attacks on the cerebrum. He saw slender electrodes seeking insidiously into brain tissue, points penetrating critical areas in the third ventricles. Violet geometric lines served as guides to suture in skulls, looked like decaying wounds. The brain itself is insensitive, mused Reinach, it's that after-math—thought, imagery they bring the ultimate anguish.

REINACH shivered. Humans. Fascio-paranoids they were, but that was only an exaggeration of a potentiality that was present in every so-called *sane* human! He had emerged from this monstrous egg. He retained human attitudes. Like Marl, he suddenly yearned for the escape of which she had dreamed. Freedom from this gross, grimacing flesh!

But first he must escape, somehow, from this hell. He must find Marl, and they had to escape. But as a Higher Man, he was almost useless to act against the Fascio-paranoids. The ESP faculties couldn't function against those brains of illogic and distortion.

But even operating as a human, he, Reinach, had qualities. Speed. Strength. Stamina. Instinctual responses. Reinach heaved upward. Pain lanced up his arms. He fell back. His wrists were clamped to a table with metal bands!

Differently now, slicing outward with the aggressive sharpness of a sword, Reinach sent his telepathic ESP projection searching after Marl. But there was no Marl. She had not yet awakened from her voluntary anesthesia.

Reinach's lips were thin like lines of hardened blood. "Get me out of these bonds, Velescon. *Get me out!*"

"I'll try to help you. But they're coming after me. I'm acting against orders."

"Aren't you afraid, like the other scientists?"

"Yes. But I know that the Earth will be wiped out, effaced from space like a dreamer's shadow. You've been in your—whatever state you've been in—three months, Reinach." Velescon looked grotesque in his strained working smock and plastroid gloves. His piercing eyes were set in dark hollows like faded stones.

"Three months!"

"Earth time," said Velescon. "Until now, they didn't want to destroy your body. They wanted to see what made you tick. They haven't found out. You knew when to regain your consciousness, for now they are going to kill you.

We've kept you alive, Reinach, with injections of concentrated amino acids, fibrinogen and vitamins in sugar solution, or you would be an emaciated skeleton. You must keep on living."

"Thanks," said Reinach dryly. "I don't intend to die now."

"You mustn't," said Velescon with sudden intensity. "We scientists exiled here—that was an ironic and hideous joke of Earthian law. Our sanity returned. We were enslaved by fear of pain. And we were forced to work on you." His eyes flickered toward the door, across the floor of hellish torture, through clouds of writhing steam. Like Dante in Hades, thought Reinach. Like a man crawling through hell, preferring death, but afraid of the torturous roads that can take a man there.

"I'm going to free you, Reinach. Leave immediately, fight your way free. But leave me. Soon, I'll be beyond memory. Don't burden yourself with me." His hands fumbled nervously with the lock mechanism on the table. "Tell me, Reinach, was it you Mutants who attacked our minds, caused us to be exiled here? Somehow, I can't believe it was you—different ones."

"It wasn't," said Reinach. "You can depend on that."

"I shall, Reinach. If *homo sapiens* ever had any chance for survival, it's you. Fight, Reinach! You have a stake in it too. Earth is doomed to destruction unless The Leader's armadas are stopped."

"Already!" gasped Reinach. "He has ships already?"

"Three months is a long time when you have a hundred of the greatest earth minds working twenty-four hour shifts; with labor at your disposal who gladly die at their machines for the STATE! These cities were geared to terrific production. The ancient Martian race were our equals at least in technocracy. All we had to do was throw into action the giant thermocouples, and limitless energy and machines began to grind. Any minute now The Leader will give the command

to attack across space. Earth has no defense, Reinach. And even if it can scare up something, the end is inevitable. The mark of human evolution will be a new Nova blazing its pathetic message for the morbidly curious."

The bands snapped open. Reinach sprang to his feet, crouched there. A surging strength flowed into his heart, into his tendons. His neural circuits seemed to crackle with tingling purpose.

The door opened. Someone screeched. A red light arced across the synthetic hell. Two Purple-clad soldiers stood there in arrogant eagerness.

One of them, a burly, pulpy shape with a black beard, said:

"Even if you could act against us, which you cannot, it's too late, hero. The attack has been launched. Soon, Earth will be ours!"

The other soldier bent forward, eyes glowing. "You have been set free just in time," he said to Reinach, "—to die!" The rheumatic yellow light shown from the neutron gun in his hand. There was a blurring sigh. The table shifted slightly, a third of it vanished. A burning cloud drifted across the fetid air. They had deadly guns now for the first time; weren't too practiced.

Reinach moved.

CHAPTER VII

NO ONE really saw him move. The purple soldiers yelped with startled fear. Madly the armed one fired at streaking blurs that had seemed a man.

Reinach heard Velescon yell. "Show them no mercy, Reinach! Kill. They're after your life. They care for nothing else."

Kill. Reinach's heart twisted with sudden nausea even as he acted. Kill. Why had he been hurled into a lair of beasts and forced, himself, to be a beast, slobbering, straining to kill?

There was no answer then. Only the necessity. Kill, Reinach! Fight

like a beast in the jungle. *You came from humanity. Return to them one last time.* Beat the humans at their own grisly games. Kill with the efficiency even Fascio-paranoia has never known.

Reinach's breath hissed outward with the effort. His fist smashed into the burly bearded face and the face tumbled floorward in a red streaming smear. Reinach's hands twisted. The other soldier tried to escape. Reinach's fists rose and fell and the soldier folded loosely, his purple uniform suddenly soaking up red rain like thirsty soil.

Reinach twisted. But Velescon was gone. There were other exits, and Velescon hadn't wanted to be a burden to Reinach. The Higher Man raced down a dim corridor. The grotesque, alien designs of the walls rushed past with a gentle sigh. Reinach the Higher Man—a half naked sleek machine of blood-streaked flesh, its hair streaming behind.

Door after alien door opened before his implacable fists as he searched for Marl. And after he found her, what then? It was too late to save the Earth. The armada loaded with lethal neutron and proton armaments was even now swooping toward Earth. What remained now but to kill? To kill that which had killed him and his kind and all the dreams of man and super-man?

Reinach found her in another 'laboratory' surrounded by tortured men. But she, alone, was untortured, a cold marble woman of stone outstretched on a table among many other tables, but Reinach didn't see any of the others. He saw only the woman he loved, whose mind he had shared, with whom he had known an intimacy no human had ever known with another.

Marl, he thought. He brushed sweat from his eyes. Marl. Wake up. It's time to wake up. His ESP faculties sensed their approach, but he shut the telepathic contact off immediately as the horror of their dark minds sent his own retching with awful memory

Marl.

The door burst open. A flood of purple flowed toward him like slime. And Marl stirred gently, mysteriously, like deep water stirs. She sat up, and then, he scarcely saw her move, she was by his side.

Ric. I love you, Ric. You're god and man in one. And we'll escape together and be free!

The purple ooze flowed to a sluggish stop. Reinach's face curled into a mask of dark hate. He saw no face, no intelligent life in the mob that menaced him. He saw only an oozing purple blob, faceless, formless, an amorphous menace to reason.

And the soldiers were afraid. A few neutron guns pointed. Eyes stared and lips quivered.

The beasts fear us, Ric, her thoughts dripped contempt and loathing. They're animals and they fear us like animals fear them.

They'll know the meaning of fear, Reinach promised.

She looked at him oddly. And there was an expression in her eyes that sent a cold wind whirling through the mazes of his mind.

A soldier of The Leader stepped forward. "We were to kill you. A new order from Our Leader has decreed that you two should be brought before him. He would look at you before you die. He is curious about you, Our Leader."

"Why is he curious?" said Reinach, even as his fingers curled, and his muscles flexed with longing.

"We knew you two were different. We didn't know how you were different. We couldn't find out anything. Your nervous system was blocked. But nothing can long remain a mystery to Our Leader. Our Leader who rules as the Sun rules. Our Leader whose wisdom is that of all time and all dimensions. Our Leader who—"

"—who is afraid," snarled Reinach. "Your Leader who has so carefully plotted the extermination of all humanity." Reinach laughed. It wasn't a pleasant laugh, and it contained no mirth, only bitter and terrible hate.

He started to spring among them. *No, Ric. Can't you see? Let them*

take us to their Leader. In such a system as this, one need only get their Leader to destroy them all. A state has but one head. Cut it, Ric!

Reinach fell back. Yes, Marl was right. She was always right. He was wrong. He had been wrong too many times. Why should that be? He swept his big arms before them in a contemptuous gesture. "Take us to your Leader, purple puppets. We're anxious to satisfy your Leader's curiosity."

Gingerly, shying away from contact, the soldiers surrounded Reinach and Marl and marched them away.

THE SOLDIERS took the two directly to The Leader's "palace" which had once been some central public building for the long vanished Martians who had come and gone as mysteriously as does all things. They had had their dreams, even as man and super-man had dreamed. And they were gone.

They traveled by swift monorail car across the towering mile-high buildings of the rehabilitated city of Olympus, the Mountain of the Gods. They traveled fast. Reinach's clear penetrating mind grasped impressions of the great alien city and the planet which few people of Earth had ever seen, or had ever desired to see. It was the only planet in the System that could sustain human life, but it was too morbid too graphic in its portrayal of a dominant life form's futile cycle of birth and death without cause.

It was mid-day. To the North a tiny sun shone, and the sky was a pale frigid blue. A smothering haze suffused the deserts to the South, fading to a purple mist over the mountains ahead where the spires of the other two cities gleamed starkly like bony fingers.

The red-brown waters of the mile-wide canal to his right ran sullenly. Along its high walled banks attenuated trees rose five hundred feet; their crowns of small green bulbs stored with water swayed in the thin wind.

In those other two cities sycophants of The Leader toiled fanatically, chained to their machines.

Olympus contained only a few lonely wandering souls. It was a giant children's playhouse dominated by a mad adult. Like children they played well with their arbitrarily set-up rules, until the playhouse would fall.

Two incredibly ancient cities, dead and dusty for aeons, now seething and crackling with billions of volts of man-made lightning. Harnessing atomic energy into lethal weapons was complicated, more than mere routine mechanical procedure. But those exiled scientists had succeeded, flayed into frenzied achievement by whips of merciless mental terrors.

In those other cities Reinach knew that the metals of their construction were still being changed into radioactive power and into furnaces and ships, proton and neutron guns. Atom-smashing, metal-mutating, it was all there. Bent toward achieving the dread goal humanity had always been trying to escape: From prison. From tyranny. From hide-bound custom. From the Old Man's dreary repetition of tribal shibboleths. From all the horrors of distorted reality.

Reinach's jaws tightened over the words. "Man, proud Man—"

Marl's sudden thought. *How I hate them all, the humans, Ric!*

He looked at her. He tried to fathom the new person she had become.

Marl. Have you contacted your dream of ultimate reality?

Yes. He saw her eyes close. *The Lolahr Amu. It's here. It is waiting.*

What is it waiting for, Marl?

For us. I know the final goal of all evolution. The dream can come true, Ric. I know.

Reinach laughed again, the same mirthless laugh. *The dream's shattered. You must know that the fascist-paranoid's armada is even now nearing the Earth. Under such a release of energy, the Earth will become a flaming Nova. You care nothing for humanity. But remember, our kind will go, too. This attack will end the dream. 'Broken is the Golden Bowl!—'*

You must remember—the Lolahr-

amu. Marl didn't elaborate. She only smiled enigmatically.

Let her dream, thought Reinach. Let her believe that the Golden Bowl is not broken. But he knew. Reinach had almost decided that the Lolahr-amu, the ultimate life-form, was itself only a fragment of that broken dream. Nothing remained except dubious satisfaction of revenge!

SURROUNDED by towering dark monoliths of sleek gleaming metal, alien art that seemed somehow fourth-dimensional, they were marched on into the depths of the "palace" of The Leader. A faint silver autoluminescence from spontaneously decomposing matter glowed from invisible sources, pulsing from alien walls and ceiling built by a race of which nothing else remained. Whatever else that race had been, it had not been human.

Massive doors slid open. Reinach and Marl were in a colossal vaulted expanse, massively circular, with spiraling columns of a million hypnotic hues that seemed to spin faster and faster as Reinach looked into them. Hundreds of wildly spinning columns, noiselessly turning, giving out blinding coloration. With difficulty, Reinach pulled his eyes away.

In the center of the great vaulted chamber was a raised dais of deep blue like deepest ocean, and on this dais in a purple throne sat The Leader. The small wrinkled man was almost smothered in a mass of multicolored cushions and exotic flowers. Scents of many perfumes floated sickeningly on cool drafts of air. The wizened, skeletal shape was motionless, a bald dried mummy that seemed hardly human.

As they were marched toward The Leader, Reinach noticed the metallic cages in a half circle before the throne; they seemed to enclose vague shadowy shapes that moved in tremulous shudders, like flinching flesh. By each cage stood a towering naked and bestial slave whose sole assignment seemed to be at intervals to bend down and do something with a long slender implement to the things in the cages.

And the caged things screamed, filling the vaulted expanse of the place with echoing jagged cries. Between these cries were seconds of brooding silence.

As they came near the high dais with its blue throne, the Leader's eyes began to shine like evil jewels from a husked and toothless face. With a quick gesture of hands no larger than a child's, he moved the soldiers back with a gesture. Faces drained white with awe. They stood stiffly.

The grotesque little monster leaned toward Reinach, looked down like a rat from a rafter. "You two are not human," his voice was cracked with age. "You sent those scientific minds here to me. *Why?*"

Reinach laughed.

The Leader's eyes glowed more brightly, more evilly. "If you're not human then you must be plotting against humanity. If so, you want to rule. And if you want to rule, I am in your way. Is this not correct?"

Reinach laughed.

The Leader half rose, trembling with the weakness of age. "Freaks! Freaks! You're meat and blood like any human. You can die like these things in the cages. Die and still live for my pleasure!"

Reinach didn't laugh. He was suddenly too sick to laugh, too sick with horror from the realization that the things in the cages had once been human.

A look of mystical fear closed the many wrinkles of The Leader's face. A quivering finger pointed. "Why did you send those scientists here to me, and enable me to conquer the Earth? You have an ulterior motive. What is it? Speak!"

"You haven't conquered anything, except reason," said Reinach.

"My armadas are very near the Earth now. Soon, there will be no Earth as you remember, freak! And your purpose is the same as mine; I know that. But you can't defeat my Empire which is destined to rule all things. But you, with your special powers, whatever they are, would be of great benefit to me. Excellent servants of the Order."

Reinach trembled with dark hate.

This is the epitome of human madness, he thought. This is the drooling beast of mankind which has taken a dominant life form!

Behind Reinach, one of the humped crimson forms in the cages screeched, a soulless cry of ultimate misery. The Leader chuckled. A red reeling rage suffused Reinach's consciousness. Thalamic-cortical control exploded in a burst of violent hate.

Kill, Reinach, Marl's thought. This is the Hydra's head. Cut it off, Reinach.

All of Reinach's non-human control fled down a reeling road of quavering rage. One bound, and the thin bird-like neck was in his hands. The soldiers and huge muscled slaves had moved, but far too slowly. One long gurgling cry was piped from The Leader's throat as from a drowning flute. Reinach lifted him by the neck. Spindly arms and legs twitched and jerked. Little sweaty fingers clawed impotently at Reinach's swelling arms.

Through a mist of swirling unreality, Reinach felt his fingers twist. Felt the bones crushing beneath his hands. Marl's scream tore aside the drunken veil. He sprang down from the high throne to Marl's side.

From every side what seemed to be thousands of purple forms were rolling toward them.

"We're surrounded," thought Reinach. "Cornered like hunted animals, which we've truly become."

It was a diapason of movement and sound. The things in the cages formed a choral cacaphonous horror. The slaves were bellowing, and the converging purple soldiers were yelling with fanatical distorted faces. The air was criss-crossed with death rays.

Run! Her thought was vibrant with urgency. We must elude them a while longer. It's almost time.

Marl! Time for what? Tell me. Tell me before—

But she was running away. Running, curving, streaking with a speed no human had ever attained even in their most wishful thinking dreams. Reinach leaped after her.

CHAPTER VIII

REINACH raced beside her. He felt the ripping trails of proton beams slicing through the aeon-old columns of coruscating light, leaving wakes of condensation. The whole great vault crackled and roared with the deadly interchange of kinetic energy. Pain hit Reinach's left side. His arm. Desperately he willed the synaptic connections apart, cut off the pain shooting from the wounded area.

Run. We must escape now. It's almost time.

Time for what, thought Reinach. Time to die. Time to stop dreaming. *Run where? Every possible exit is blocked. The place teems with purple puppets!*

The place was a shambles of interlacing death beams, cries of pain and death.

Smoke spurted from the brief plastic covering Marl's twisting body. Sickened, Reinach saw her stumble, plunge forward. He streaked after her body as it glided in a long spinning slide across the polished mosaic of the floor. Reinach saw the long charred wound across her naked back, as her body slid helplessly toward one of those spinning, multicolored columns.

Reinach plunged after her, grabbed frantically, his hand gripped her ankles. And together they shattered those brilliant veils of light, as though they had drifted into a rain-bow.

Reinach felt himself spinning in a vortex of power. Maintain his hold on Marl's ankles, he was sucked downward through cold darkness. Thin and bitter air rushed past.

An expulsion of power kicked them out in a foot-thick layer of fine powdery dust. Choking, they climbed to their feet and looked back. There, the column still spun its colored song.

It isn't a solid, thought Reinach. It's a magnetized vacuum shaft with walls of oscillating color. I think we're somewhere far below the city.

Yes. Are you hurt badly, Ric?

He looked dully at his arm. It hung limp at his side, scarred tissue

now black. *Marl, how are you?*

Only a superficial burn, Ric. I imagine the puppets are afraid of those columns. But their fanatical purpose may overcome that fear now. They'll probably follow us. Let's move on, Ric. We've got to keep away from them a while longer.

They started walking rapidly along a narrow incredibly ancient pathway of dusty decay, along the bank of a small sluggishly flowing subsidiary canal. An underground city of stagnant airlessness had slept for aeons here even before the surface city above had been built. Long, crumbling corridors stretched away on every side. Pale autoluminescence filtered the dry air, very faintly now. It had been burning a long time.

The whole structural plan was cruder, rougher in design than that of the surface cities, but with a primitive similarity. Whatever civilization had dominated Mars long ago had evolved from these subterranean caverns at sometime in their process of evolution.

Marl's mind felt his lostness, his confusion. She stopped, settled close against him. Her body was warm, though her mind was cold and distant. Her arms went around his neck. When he kissed her, the alien world encompassing Reinach faded, and all the looming chaos and urgencies died.

For a glorious moment the complete unity they had once known seemed to return, but then the illusion was gone. Reinach wondered if it had ever been anything other than an illusion.

Let's keep moving, Marl. The purple puppets will follow. They'll function according to the last commands of their dead Leader, until their memories and bodies die. Though why we should prolong this hopeless dance, I don't know. Why, Marl? What is this hope of yours?

Her black, glittering eyes fixed on his. He felt only a tinge, a vague trend of her thoughts. But the effect was shocking, sending chills and rustlings through his blood.

They walked on along the slug-

gish canal. *I can't explain, Ric, she thought. Either you will understand, or you won't. It's yours and yours alone to find. No one can help you. And realizing that, Ric, I'm so afraid!*

Reinach stumbled slightly. A dread realization started blossoming in his pained mind. They were both Higher Men, creatures of ESP. Still, they were different. Even among Higher Men, as among all things, similarity was only a matter of degree.

What was the extent of the dissimilarity stretching between them?

HIS THOUGHTS were accusative. *Marl, you've been contacting IT, the Lolahr-amu, many times since we came to Mars. Haven't you? Why haven't I?"*

She didn't answer. But she had said she couldn't answer; that there was no outward way of making him understand. Only he could resolve the meaning, whatever, wherever it was. The Lolahr-amu was an answer. Marl had been in telepathic contact with it, but he had not. The Lolahr-amu was the final purity of ESP. And the Higher Men were lesser phases of ESP development. Then how had Marl been able to understand, anticipate; when he—?

Marl! His thoughts were anguish. I didn't want to kill any humans. Something died inside me when I did that!

I feel nothing toward them. Marl thought. To me, they are only savage, brutal primates. We've jumped too far ahead of them. I feel no bond with them. If it weren't for the fact that many of our kind were on Earth liable to be destroyed, I would care nothing for the further existence of the Earth.

But we came from them, Marl. They gave birth to us in untold agony.

We owe them nothing. We're no longer human. They are left far behind.

Reinach shivered uncontrollably. They walked faster. Reinach had an idea where they were going. He had caught the suggestion from the depths of her mind, mysterious

depths he could not quite fathom. The other Higher Men who had managed to escape from the ship were hiding in this same subterranean ruins, up the canal. They were to join the others. According to that suggestion, the others had found a secluded chamber which the searching Fascio-paranoids would find most difficult to discover.

Reinach thought, a little hopelessly. *You jumped further than I did perhaps, Marl. I try, but I can't see it your way. I try, I follow your thought paths only so far, then a dark door locks me out.*

We must both escape our pasts—completely. That is the goal, Ric.

Reinach heard their clumsy slogging strides behind him. He turned. Eight purple soldiers were hurrying along the ancient canal. In their hands, neutron guns parted mists of fear before them as they advanced. They cried out as they spied their victims, immediately began firing.

Do we keep on running, wondered Reinach quietly, resignedly. Or do we stand and fight now? We must, sometime.

Marl swayed. Her eyes closed, then opened slowly. Her mind blanked out. She spoke to him, her lips moving, verbal tones issuing in deep vibrant revelation. "No, Ric. No more running. It's time. The union is complete. We destroy them, Ric. See."

Reinach felt the overpowering blinding surge of godlike vitality and fire blasting from her. He was a part of it, a buffeted particle in a sea of illimitable power. There was a thundering weight of boiling rushing energy. Surrounding reality faded for Reinach. Blazing walls of white heat burned into his brain. Clouds of smoke roared.

WHATEVER it was, it was a degree of ESP Reinach had never suspected. And Marl had it. But Reinach hadn't known. His body pulsed, pounded, vibrated as though it were preparing to shatter into a billion tinkling fragments. There was a blazing burst of supernal fire—

A thick ominous quiet after that. The stupendous burden he had

helped support dropped away. The godlike weight crumbled, left him a spent, wheezing, half blinded thing. He stood trembling, retching. Sweat poured from his shivering flesh.

Instead of eight guards—Reinach uttered a little cry of horror. There were only eight lumps of charred flesh now. The purple soldiers were blackened corpses. Cinders. Burned out husks. Their lives blasted away by forces far, far beyond their narrow concepts.

Pyrotics, thought Reinach, his neural circuits smoking with the strain. *We were pyrotic then. We burned them with our power. Pyrotics!*

Not us, Ric. Not you and I. But all of us, united. The union isn't complete. It will be soon now.

Reinach staggered on, dazed, half blinded, stumbling through ancient dust and rotting columns as though through the tottering halls of madness.

The canal made a sharp painful bend. The light dimmed. Reinach sensed that the others were near. They went down a sharp incline, between moldy walls. The light faded slowly into a shadowy chilled mist.

He saw the bodies there in the gloom.

Our bodies won't matter for long, thought Marl tremulously.

Something like death filled the deep buried cavern. A cold wind blew. There was no sound. Dimly, he saw the bodies of the other Higher Men lain out in rows across the dusty floor. He tried to reach out, tried to get into their teleband areas, and found only a swirling vastness from which he retreated in a burst of unreasoning terror.

They were in a final stasis. United, their minds alone lived, fired beyond conception. And Reinach knew that they had become one with the pure invisible form which had came for them—the Lolahr-amu.

Marl's hand dragged from his, swung limply. She seemed more shadow now than substance as she walked away from him, noiselessly through the dust.

Helpless longing pain held him there, immobile, speechless, as he

watched her. She paused among the dim shadowed forms at her feet. She seemed to glow with unearthly luster. Her eyes shown through the shadows with a brilliant, almost greedy ecstasy as she lay down among them stretched her full rich body out to rest. Dreamily, as though from a nameless distance, her thought called.

It's time, Ric. We'll have the ultimate power, the final knowledge. Join us now, Ric. Hurry, Ric.

Reinach watched. His eyes burned. His throat felt sticky and harsh. His chest pulsed with growing helplessness and icy fear. He could feel her brain swirling with anticipated ecstasy, like a river rushing to the sea. He could feel a dim associative ecstasy too—with her, yet not with her. There was a shimmering blockage between them that he should have known before was there.

Meshed in ensorcelled dream, her mind was roving the jeweled vastness of illimitable space through an endless mental palace of unity with the Lolahr-amu. Pure thought, pure photonic energy, the final evolutionary goal. A glimmering glittering, misty haze of incredible distances. Immediate oneness with all the reeling data of nebulae and galaxy no human had ever dared dream. A nebulous, quivering sea of fiery atoms, visible now in the infinite bounderies of thought alone. The inevitable ultimate of ESP.

Reinach stumbled forward on leaden feet. He called. *Marl... Marl... you can't leave me... you can't... understand... I'm alone... alone...*

Ric, Try, and if you love me enough you can join us. Ric.

Reinach sank beneath her lifeless arm, huddled near her, somewhere against a backdrop of infinity a thought entered the spinning chaos of his mind. He wasn't losing all contact with this vast ESP entity. Reinach could grasp segments of its plan.

* * *

THE ARMADA of ships from the Fascio-paranoical stronghold were already nearing Earth. There had seemed no way to prevent the

atomic doom. But there was a way, so simple and logical to the Lolahr-amu.

It could project photonic force across space—there was a bridge—those other Higher Men, creatures of ESP, on Earth would complete the circuit.

IT could circumvent all space-time with the inexplicable immediacy of ESP, an electro-gravetic principle understood only by being a more integral part of it than Reinach. For ESP was immediate. To IT there was no distance as human's knew of it, which was time.

Reinach lay there in a boiling inferno of outrushing, searing power. He could not engage wholly. But dimly, far out around the trembling fringes of his own burning, melting ESP, he knew what was happening. He sensed the triumph of the Lolahr-amu over the gross animated matter called Man.

To Reinach, IT's unexplainable nature increased with only faint perceptibility as the other Higher Men of Earth fused with IT, their bodies dying, their ESP faculties flowing outward on bands of immediacy.

And when the thin, blue, energy-streaming jets of the dead Leader's space ships screamed down into Earth's atmosphere—

Flashing, roaring along the fringes of Reinach's tottering ESP consciousness, the atomic-driven ships of the Fascio-paranoids careened in a howling vortex for a time. Ripping blast rays of neutrons and protons hurled their deadly loads aimlessly into boiling atmosphere. Radiant energy, base and deadly, was a roaring sea of seething violence. The streams of disintegrating atomic power became great looping curves of misdirected madness. Brilliant white-hot suns flamed as the ships piled into mutating lumps, until Earth's sight was blotted out by the supernal glare.

Passively, the shocked Earth looked up, then retreated into their doomed burrows to die. But they didn't die. Humanity was to live. But they never knew why. Only Reinach knew.

Tortured beyond words to tell, or sane thoughts to think, he lay in the ancient dust. But his last ragged shreds of ESP had forced the Lolahr-amu to act against the Fascio-paranoids.

After it had fused with the other Higher Men on Earth, the incredible entity would have left humanity to their fate—but for him, Reinach.

By mere suggestion, the great thought entity had utilized the Fascio-paranoid's will to self-destruction, sent them hurtling into the Sun. A vast raging ocean of flaming gases opened for the down-plunging ships, and the distorted dreams of the Fascio-paranoids died in a sea of crimson hydrogen from red fangs that leaped out half a million miles to receive them.

Reinach screamed. *Marl. MARL!*

He received an impression. Was it Marl? He couldn't know.

You didn't love me enough, Ric. You were too human. You loved the humans more. You saved them when they should have died, Ric, so stay with them and die with them—you who could have been eternal.

CHAPTER IX

WHEN REINACH opened his eyes, there was no more pain. There was only a dull dry emptiness. And a cosmic silence that settled with awful heaviness down through the still shadows.

He touched her and then moved his arm across her body. It was stiff and cold. With an inarticulate cry, Reinach tottered to his knees, swayed over her. Her fingers were icy and pale. He raised her arm, but it was still and lifeless. He kissed her. Her lips were moist stone.

Lolahr-amu was gone, far indeed from the wild yearning of his charred brain. And somewhere, a part of ITS vast collective intelligence, Marl was streaking outward, skirting incomputable distances with the timeless, measureless velocity of ESP.

And the bodies beside Reinach were dead. There were thousands of similarly dead bodies buried in the Higher Men's hide-aways on Earth, none of which would ever live again. Yet he lived. But they didn't.

Marl didn't. He knew. He sat there for a long time in the dust beside the body trying to find life. The oily canal water made faint sly sounds beside him as it slipped past. And he tried to find life in Marl's body, but there was none to find.

The whole episode now was vague, dull, distant in his weary brain. They had tried to take him; and he had wanted to go. But some last tremendous mind-wracking effort had destroyed him somehow. He remembered it only vaguely, that mind-reeling agony from which he had barely been able to find his way. The Lolahr-amu and all the Higher Men who had joined IT, they-it had found only a kind of final sublimation. Sublimation after all was only the upward shifting of the libido from channel to channel in the upward spiraling direction toward some final state of purity. Reinach had not been ready. And they had left him.

They would have abandoned humanity to atomic fire, but he had somehow found enough strength to persuade the Lolahr-amu to act against the Fascio-paranoids. But after that, he had nothing more to struggle with, and he had sank back down into mere flesh, and wrenched bones, and quivering, flinching agony.

And bitter remorse. He had a dark growing contempt for himself. What had he to live for now? He wasn't human. Humans would hate him, hunt him, as an abnormality. But they could never call him one of them.

And his kind were gone. So where was he. Where was Reinach now?

He walked with slow, painful weariness back along the airless bank of the subterranean canal. He didn't look back at the bodies that lifelessly dreamed behind him, not even at the most beautiful body at all. It would fall into rotteness, and the worms would eat it, and dust would cake its bones. But its essence would live forever.

We are Lolahr-amu.

They were far, so far above mere body. They had fused with the prime basics of the cosmos.

And he was alone.

REGINACH walked past the charred forms that had been purple soldiers, and into the multi-colored magnetized levitation shaft and went upward. He emerged high above Olympus. He could see in all directions with painful clarity. The mountains in blue haze; the mile-wide canal rolling silently, sullenly downward from the distant pole. The endless hard glare of red clay stretching toward the dead sea bottoms of Barsoom.

And with Martian suddenness, the sun went down. And later Deimos climbed upward with lazy brilliance across the sky. Reinach didn't wait there for Phobos to follow. He went down a regular levitation shaft into a windy deserted street and walked slowly down it, and out of the destroyed city.

And as he left it, he saw a few of the dead, dry place's abandoned insane. They were wandering through the abruptly incomprehensive patterns of an alien land. They were mindless, guideless now—their Leader gone, their war-gods destroyed, their machines—built to destroy the earth—were idle.

Their System was shattered, their playhouse fallen. Like little children they poked around for some new delusion; but the mad adults who had provided them dreams of grandeur and conquest were gone. Without direction, they would rapidly drop on down in degeneration, starve in the midst of machines that no longer interested them.

Humans, thought Reinach darkly. Humans.

But he had many, too many, of their delusions and dreams, so Reinach didn't really care. Yet he was not like them. They were human. He wasn't human. He was nothing now.

He was alone. *Alone.*

Reinach wandered aimlessly along the great canal, through a solid lake of red moonlight. Then he crossed on a high, finely arched bridge where the thin cold wind sighed mournfully about his unfeeling body. On the far side he started walking through the crimson light. A hard

metallic thing scuttled across his path. Close above him he heard the whirring leather wings of a night-flying *Khraj*.

Behind him, he heard a long faint cry. He turned. A figure was running toward him across the shiny surface, throwing out a long shadow that streamed away from him beneath the eyes of Phobos and Deimos.

Some purple soldier, thought Reinach without emotion, who can never forget the commands of his Leader.

He wondered if he would resist the purple soldier. He didn't think about it. It didn't matter.

Reinach turned wearily and started walking again toward the nearby V in the mountain chain; a valley that would lead into the dead sea. Let the purple soldier come. Would he use his ESP powers against him? It seemed inadequate and childish now, for him to play god again. One must be one or the other. One cannot live, both man and god.

The pursuer was still some distance behind Reinach when he stumbled into the deep still shadows of the valley's mouth. Here the clay gave way to fine powdery dust like dried blood. A little eddy of wind sighed down the valley, swirled the fine red dust around his knees. It clouded around his face, choking him. He stopped, turned to await his pursuer.

He came up close to Reinach, running slowly, his breath sounding heavy. And when he stood there looking at Reinach, his face was a bloody wreck from which only bright eyes looked untouched, and unafraid.

"Velescon," mumbled Reinach. "You managed to live, too."

The thin emaciated figure nodded. Reinach listened to his own voice echoing strangely across the high crumbled walls of the valley. Deimos hurtled above the rift against the sky. A flood of red light flowed up the length of the valley like a rising tide of molten rust.

"I saw you leaving Olympus," said Velescon. "Yes. I've managed to live,

too. They gave me the fifth threshold."

"No one can survive that," said Reinach.

"I did. I don't know how. Maybe faith did it. You gave me hope, Reinach."

"Did I?" Reinach laughed, a low bitter sound.

"Before we go back to the city, Reinach, tell me about it. Tell me everything."

They sat down in the soft cushion of red dust, and Reinach told Velescon everything. And though Velescon couldn't comprehend all of it, he believed all that Reinach said. But Reinach hadn't explained why he remained.

Velescon's angular tortured face was a deep shadow as Reinach looked at it. "Reinach—if you were one of the Higher Men—why didn't you join this—this ultimate life form as you call it? Can you explain that?"

No, he couldn't explain that; but he tried. Maybe he cried a little, too, as he tried. A warm gentle understanding smile somehow managed to twist the pain-distorted mask of Velescon's face.

"Try it, Reinach," he said softly. "Try using your ESP power now."

Reinach stared at him. He hesitated. But he had begun to comprehend Velescon's meaning, even before he tried to use the power—and failed.

A MIXED feeling of fear, sadness and somehow, of gladness came over him with the realization of his failure.

Again and again, straining through burning neural circuits, he tried. But there was no more power. Not any more. He was no longer even part of a Higher Man. In fact he could scarcely remember that he had ever been such a one. What superhuman acts had he been capable of? How had he thrown into effect such powers?

"It's gone, Velescon," he said

harshly, "It's gone. GONE."

Velescon put an arm about his trembling shoulder. "You couldn't bear the strain. The cables wouldn't carry it, Reinach. They burned out."

Yes. It had died. Deep inside him somewhere, it lay dead, a lost charred husk. He had burned it out forever in that last colossal effort—

"Come on, Reinach," Velescon's voice was gentle. "We're going home."

He took Reinach's arm. Together they started walking slowly toward the shadowy skyline of Olympus. Two humans, side by side, thought Reinach. *Two humans!*

"There'll be investigations here now since Earth's eyes are opened. This nonsensical exile law must be changed. There'll be no more isolation of abnormals. They're part of us; we must learn to live with them, cure them. And forget your past, Reinach. Your kind—we'll follow them, though it may take us an awfully long time. Meanwhile, we've much work to do."

We've much work to do. A lot of despair fell away from Reinach. His eyes brightened. His steps quickened.

"We're going back, Reinach. They need you and me. We're going back to Earth, Reinach. Back to *humanity*."

They needed *him*—Reinach.

Reinach walked faster. A warm eager glow he had never known before flamed high, burned with hungry growing fire.

And then he heard the faint, far sound. For a brief second his brain reeled madly, with remembered ecstasy. Thin, enchantingly sweet, the voice called, like the sighing of plucked strings, whispering, murmuring, rippling away. It faded into incomprehensible distances. And then it was gone.

And it never returned to torture Reinach again.

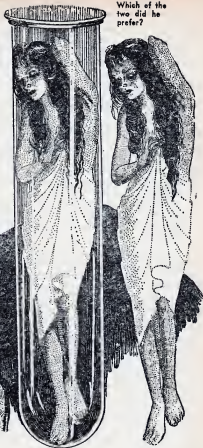
And he was glad.

SEE ANNOUNCEMENT OF NEW POLICY ON PAGE 99, *THE TEST TUBE*—THE NEXT ISSUE WILL FEATURE NEW STORIES BY SOME OF THE GREATEST

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THE DIFFERENCE

by Kenneth O'Hara



Was the thing that was Weber's beautiful wife really alive? And could he know the answer simply by killing her?

BENSON, HEAD of the Socio-Psychological Bureau of Field Control, slouched behind his desk, staring at a three-dim screen that flickered with vague mind shadows, shifting dream images from the tortured subconscious of Marc Weber.

He said, "I'm afraid, Ballard, that Weber's failing. That shows fifth stage disintegration if I ever saw

it. I sent some labmen over to watch him, secretly of course."

"Good idea," Ballard said. "Because he may go to pieces any minute. Then again, of course, he might pull out of it all right. But we overloaded the springs on that final Test. I only hope *she* comes through with integration."

Benson gave a weary sigh. "Yes, very overloaded. But we have to give

the toughest possible exams we can devise, don't we? Don't we? And the only way we can know if a Test is too stringent is—if it fails. And then it's too late—"

Ballard smiled thinly. "Yes, it's too late then. And that is the only way we can tell. Still, it might be possible that quick shock therapy could save part of Marc's mind." It was more a question, than a statement, and not very enthusiastically offered.

Benson shook his head slowly. His hand fidgeted as he studied the mental imagery projection screen. It was too easy to sympathize with what that last Test had been doing to Marc Weber's mind these past six months....

Weber let his wife—or the thing pretending to be Maria—sleep late. Today he would get the knife from the Museum. With a knife he could find out whether the thing that was supposed to be Maria was human or not. That was important to know.

He opened a self-heating breakfast cannister and sat in the quiet apartment eating hurriedly without tasting. He wasn't hungry. In fact he was physically ill. He hadn't been able to sleep for several nights. And he was too absorbed in getting the knife.

An old friend, Drakeson, was a Departmental head in the Museum and he would ask Drakeson for the knife, tell him he wanted it for another friend, Lewis, to use as a model for his primitive sculpture. Things like knives were rare and it was at least a seemingly legal way of getting one.

And he had to have a knife, nothing else would solve his highly personalized problem. It was odd; but he had to get the knife and utilize it to remain integrated. That was something none of the boys at the Labs could understand. Not even Ballard and Benson, the boys who knew everything. That was why he had to do this thing in complete secrecy. Knives were strictly museum pieces—and a high-ranking Control Bureau scientist like Weber needing

one for such an unusual purpose might not be condoned.

Weber went out into early morning sunlight, stepped onto a third speed walkway to the Museum, and was back at the apartment in an hour with the knife in his pocket. He stood there watching the people passing on various walkways through the gardens and among the fountains of the city. To World Control, these people were scarcely human really, they were just point regions in the social-field. But without Socio-Psychological Control they would have destroyed themselves with a second and final atomic war.

The Controllers in the Socio-Psychological Bureaus had to be the best integrated minds in existence, therefore the tests were tortuously rigid. Weber thought now, as he had thought at various times during the last six months since that Final Test, that maybe they had been too stringent with him. Or else they had deliberately forced him to fail. By why would Ballard or Benson do a thing like that?

Weber sat by the fountain beneath the window of the thing that was supposed to be Maria, his wife. It had been a long difficult and lonely road. At the age of ten years, with one of the five highest I.Q.'s in the global Social-Field, he had entered as an apprentice in the Control Clinic's preparatory schools. His goal was to attain a position high in the Socio-Psychological Bureau, situated in the ahistorical series between sociology and psychology.

Once accepted, he had moved in rapid progression up the scale of development. Each year there were more difficult tests in applied logic created by the Field Bureau of Vector Planning. These tests fell at irregular intervals, lasted for uncertain periods, and sometimes the student wasn't even aware of the test being in operation.

THE PROBLEMS involved goal motivation—how logically the student could solve mental and physical obstacles. Psychological field vectors activated the student

toward a goal, or solution to the problem presented.

These topological tests were harsh, rigid, ruthless. And the Vector Field Bureau was always giving increasingly difficult ones. You could make minor errors—but never one in basic scientific methodology.

But he had got through it all. Though that last Test had affected him with seeming adversity. No logical reason for it. Though he was strongly suspicious of the possibility that they had misled him, distorted that last big problem deliberately. There were limits to mental resilience. Even prospective Controllers were human! Yet, it would almost seem that they couldn't afford to be. Could human survival ever depend solely on a few other human beings?

Weber closed his eyes. His head ached as he thought about it...there had to be Controllers. The disharmony between man and his environment had been complete when the atomic war was launched and man had almost extinguished himself. Physics and death had a long head-start on psychology and life. But behind the scenes, unknown even to the general scientific world, the Socio-Psychological Bureaus had been organized and had plotted fields, world-wide fields of operation; and they had then launched a tremendous program to blot out this inequality between man's control over inorganic nature and his abysmal lack of control over himself.

A new scientific approach to social and individual psychology began which could control and predict human behavior as well as it could physics, chemistry and mathematics. Or at least to the extent that it had stopped man's penchant for self-destruction.

But a Controller had to be so superior to mass man—Weber's lips twitched and the ache in his temples throbbed more strongly. Six months since that Final Test and he felt that he hadn't passed it successfully—that he was still under surveillance.

That assignment in Field Structuring at the Bureau had started to

irritate him to the point where it might be obvious and he had asked for a three day rest. Now, if the postulates of the test had been presented to him wrongly, he would soon prove the truth with the knife. The truth about Maria—

Six months of disharmony, eruptions in the family-field. And seemingly without any logical cause. When the marital compatability tests had been given, the results had been absolutely positive! Nevertheless, incompatibility had been growing, rising to the breaking point. And there had to be something there—some hidden cause! There had to be!

He had studied, introspected, drawn structural field maps with intricate barrier distribution in his particular activity field. But the vectors and barriers always balanced out. So now he sat in the patio back of his apartment by the fountain, the fountain of multi-colored spray and gentle coolness.

The knife was cold in his hand, long and sharp and primitive, but a wonderful tool for quick and efficient prying. That was what it had been made for.

Peculiarly, he thought of something Maria had once said about the fountain. "Ocean and fountain, shadow and tree, nothing escapes, nothing is free." What had they done with her? Maria who had believed in things beyond the curtains of cold science, things you couldn't measure? In beauty, in sadness and gladness and love. He was sure now that that thing upstairs wasn't Maria—no, not quite sure—yet!

Weber got to his feet. If he could find out the truth from that thing up there without killing it. Or was it really alive? A peculiar coolness slid down his spine as he entered the elevator. His knees felt weak as he went into the apartment, into the bedroom. He remembered that first week of unforgettable happiness with the real Maria. And then the—uncertainty, the growing mental anguish of not knowing, but of having to know.

IT LAY THERE gently on the bed, one arm crossed over its breasts, its hair a cushion so black it was almost purple, glinting in the shifting colors radiating from the walls. So much like Maria.

He slid the knife from his pocket. But there was a difference. This thing—it was the problem, the last great Test that had disrupted him, apparently. A problem in concept identity.

Was she, or wasn't she, Maria?

The Test flooded back through his memory as he stood over the body. That day the problem had seemed fairly simple, even as had been all the other problems.

On several crucial tests he had veered dangerously, away from strictly scientific answers, and had almost bogged down in the more obvious pitfalls of mysticism. The tests had involved years, but there had never been a mistake in basic scientific reasoning. Only those wanderings onto the brink of vitalism. The great struggle in the convolutions of logic and emotion. Scientific methodology, goals, vectors, field-structure, barrier distribution, membership character, dynamical variants. Several times he had almost slipped into vitalism: man is simply a machine, plus an *elan vital*, or *entelechy*—a *soul*!

That was what Maria had always talked about. The *soul*. As though she believed in such a thing, somehow. That intangible, immeasurable, non-existent trap for the unwary.

Weber, and Maria, a student five vectors lower than Weber, had been seeing a great deal of each other for almost a year before Weber's final Test. They were married—only a week before Weber took that last exam in logic.

They had walked hand in hand through the park grounds to a bench among palm trees on that evening before his Test. She acted strangely and he mentioned it. "I'm the one who should worry," he said. "Except there's nothing to worry about."

"I know," she said. "Ballard told me about your going to take your final in the morning. I know something of the Test, darling. More than

you might suspect. And frankly, I'm afraid. I know the Test, it's been going on for quite a while now. I'll tell you this much about it. I haven't been forbidden to, so I'm sure it's all right to tell you. Marc—when we fell in love with each other—that's when the Test really began. You see—I'm part of the Test!"

Weber stared, then managed a smile. "That's like Ballard, to work up an emotional stunt like that. But I don't see how such a Test could involve you!"

She didn't answer immediately. The night was warm, and Weber leaned back and closed his eyes. He felt her breath, soft against his ear.

"Marc, listen to me. If I'm part of the Test, there's no telling what kind of answer you'll be forced to give, and your logical answer might hurt our relationship. If so you might not be able to control unconscious emotional reactions. Marc, you've got to understand that if you answer in my favor, but against the basic scientific methodology, it would be a crime against society! Do you see that, Marc? You've got to be honest with yourself, with humanity!"

He studied her curiously, a warm love for her and an odd admiration for her lack of sophistry strong within him. He kissed her. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "But then, I seldom do. You talk beautifully—you think strangely. Your emotionalism is a great relief after six hours in topological structuring. I'll stick to scientific methodology, don't worry. It can't mean anything as far as our association is concerned."

"I'm not so sure," she said softly. "But then I could never be sure of anything. Thank the Bureaus I don't intend to be a Controller, but only a tabulator. I could be a mystical soul-seeker so easily, darling, couldn't I?"

"Yes, perhaps," he laughed.

"I've talked it over with you so much, Marc—how abstraction, mystical evaluations attract me. When I think of you and me together, Marc, I think of abstractions—about love, happiness and—well, meaningless

terms really. Meaningless to you anyway. I think even of some intangible psychic union between us—something greater than any physical attachment—"

"Our—souls," Weber smiled, though a tinge of uneasiness shaded the smile.

"Call it anything, yes, call it a soul. Sometimes I even feel *God-intoxicated*, Marc!"

HE TOOK HER hand, and it was cold. "You're wonderful, Maria. We have a lot in common even though we're far apart in goal motivation. Yet, in those tests of mine there's always been a persistent difficulty in avoiding mystical entanglements. I've a strong leaning toward mysticism too, Maria, though it's conscious and fortunately I can control it.

"We're all still very human after all, Maria. The temptation of mysticism is big. But as scientists intent on the goal of survival, we've got to seek out those parts that are known and familiar; avoid what is unknown and unfamiliar. That's applied science."

She tightened her fingers on his hand and there was a peculiar, almost frightened light in her eyes.

"Our knowledge, Maria, is an illumination of only a small corner of the universe. It's incomplete, approximate, tentative and merely probable. It mustn't disconcert us. The methodology saves us from annihilation. We've got to keep on applying it, developing it, to survive. It sometimes seems pretty cold though, doesn't it?"

"Yes, and I'm afraid, Marc. Sometimes I think all this methodology will destroy us too, someday. I don't know how. Souls—what if there really is something, Marc? Something we can never actually see, or measure, or analyze? And what if we ignore it, and so let it dry up and wither away? What if—?"

He interrupted with a laugh. "That is all the result of too much tension, worrying about my test. Forget the *ifs*. No solution to any problem involving you and me, Maria, can be

logical and still be wrong. No need to worry, no need at all."

That's what Weber had said. And then the next morning he entered Ballard's office for the Test.

Ballard sat there looking somewhat uncomfortable, Weber thought. He seemed uneasy, and Weber couldn't remember seeing Ballard seem upset before, over anything.

It was a simple office with auxiliary screens on the walls. Ballard pressed a button and a panel slid open.

"This is it," he said softly. "The bio-wards have been working on it for three years. A new psychogenic process. You've seen the results of biosynthesis on smaller animals. This is the first time it's been attempted with a human. It's a perfect duplication, Marc. It's as perfect as biochemistry will ever be able to go in this particular branch of research."

Weber stared and slowly licked his lips. He felt cold.

"It wasn't solely for this test, or even suggested for it. I merely took advantage of it. We were afraid that Maria might tell you, so during one of the screenings we planted a hypno-suggestion that she shouldn't tell you anything until yesterday. That much anticipation we considered necessary. Too much probably would have caused excessive anxiety."

Weber sat down heavily. He blinked a number of times before he realized that he was actually doubting his own senses. Hurriedly he switched his eyes to the info-screens on either side of the alcove. Three-dim telocation revealed the fact that a number of top-ranking scientists, entire bureaus of them, were checking and agreeing with Webster's sensory reactions. There couldn't be any error there—the greatest scientists in almost all the branches of Control were nodding, verifying Weber's reactions. Don't deny the findings of your own sensory equipment if it can be checked and re-checked by science, observation. Verification—that was the scientific method.

There were two Marias standing

alive, warm, breathing, in that alcove. Weber checked that with his senses too. He felt of both of them, kissed them, felt the warm breath of each of them. They stood side by side, each a living shadow of the other. They both smiled at Weber as he made the test, smiled in that same open frank way he had grown so familiar with. They both lifted their hands in precisely the same familiar mannerisms. Up close to them, Weber could see not the faintest difference in facial expression, bodily posture....

WEBER BACKED away from the alcove, sat down again. Perspiration ran down under his collar.

Ballard was saying. "This test may seem overly simplified at first. But it isn't. Our Socio-Psychology isn't nearly as scientific as it will be. To make predictions we must usually be able to manipulate the forces of nature. We can manipulate social forces to a great extent, individuals to a lesser extent. The physicist is able to hold many forces of his laboratory constant. People aren't so predictable, as you know, Marc."

Weber listened vaguely. The two Marias smiled at him and one of the smiles might have been a mirrored reflection of the other.

"Marc, our trouble in carrying on Clinical Control of social fields is that we can't predict the individuals who manage it with enough exactness. There are always slight variables, unrevealed inherent properties. We intend to give tests with increasingly difficult emotional conflicts."

Weber's skin was cold, his eyes seemed swollen and hot as with fever. Things were happening to him, inside, and he didn't know what it was. He kept looking at the two Marias. He wanted to get something warmer and more familiar from the appearance of one than from the other. One was his wife! One was the warm laughing woman whom he had married. He knew that. And the other was only something synthetic made in the bio-labs. But they looked

the same. They seemed precisely the same. He was momentarily confused. His brain seemed to stop, retreat, shrink like an amoeba in a bowl.

The two Marias were the same. Either might have been a physical projection of the other. He half expected them to merge as though the double impression was only an optical illusion.

He swallowed heavily. He worked toward cortical-thalamic control. He knew he would need it as he had never needed it before. He stopped trying to see either of them alone as Maria. He knew that was the wrong tack. He already was beginning to see the point in this ingenious and bitter test.

He wasn't supposed to observe any dissimilarity in the two Marias.

Benson was saying while Ballard studied Weber's face. "We control the Social Fields involving the mass of man. We must, therefore, be a little more than human ourselves. You understand that, Marc? We've got to be able to pay more than lip-service to the methodology of the scientific method. We run the show. And we who run it by manipulating the social field structures have got to develop more independence, more freedom from emotion reactions. Some are more subject to these thalamic emotional weaknesses than others. Tests like this will weed out those who have all apparent integration, but who are haunted by hereditary, physiogenic weaknesses no other Tests would reveal."

Weber twisted his eyes away from the two figures of Maria. She, they, were smiling encouragement at him. Both pairs of eyes shone damply, with love. She, they, spoke. That voice, a duet of sameness, of terrible familiarity.

Weber listened to the echoes. Two voices, speaking as one. While they talked, their gestures were exactly the same.

"Be honest with yourself, Marc."

He knew no micrometer, not any combination of the most delicate scientific instruments, could detect disharmony of movement. She, they,

lifted the right leg slightly and the skirts wrinkled in the same pattern—

Weber blinked and wiped the perspiration from his eyes. He straightened his hands out slowly when he found he had been clenching them into straining fists. He looked at Ballard. "I understand all these things." He looked at Benson. "I understand what the both of you have been saying. I'm taking the Test now?"

Ballard and Benson nodded. "You've been taking the test for about six months now. Basically, it's a problem in concept identity." Benson turned, faced the two Marias. He talked on while watching the two figures.

"One of them is Maria, your wife, Weber. The other is a perfectly constructed duplication, in every possible respect. A result of two years of psychogenic work in the bio-chemistry wards. Scientists of twenty top-bureaus have studied the two of them. They can find no difference. There are the reports from these men, every possible verification. There can be no measurable difference. One is a perfectly constructed automaton replica of your wife. The other is—your wife. The question is simply this, Weber—"

He pivoted slowly, looked full at Weber and said. "*Which of the two do you prefer?*"

WEBER FOUGHT silently and alone for the answer, his eyes closed. His life had been so cold and meaningless before he met Maria. And after that there was meaning, substance. Now there were two Marias. Which did he prefer? It had been checked, verified by the most reliable scientific observation. The two were exactly the same. He could find no difference with his senses.

The precisely conditioned mental machinery of Weber worked, hard. He felt it grinding, laboring, boring. A kind of cold terror flowed along his skin. His blood seemed to congeal, his temples throbbed. But he knew his brain was functioning logically. Scientific methodology—he started at the bottom and worked up

through every possible postulate—

The field theoretical, organismic, hypothetico-deduction. Operational analysis. The slogan. Yes, the slogan number...there...there it was clear...

By operational definition is meant the definition of concepts through the operations or manipulations which established them: Concept, then, of length is gained by measurement with the meter stick. In psychology, intelligence is what the intelligence test *measures*. Measures....measures....

Concepts which cannot be defined operationally are *meaningless*. One must be able to give an operational, in this sense experiential, criterion to differentiate between concepts.

Now—two women. One, Maria, a woman he loved, his wife. There was another...another exactly the same. That had been verified. No *measurable* difference existed.

Which do I prefer?

These was only one answer he could give:

The question itself is meaningless because no one could differentiate between the two.

In any specific problem, concepts must be given operational definitions. Unless this is done, the theory may become meaningless.

Weber tore his eyes away from the two warm breathing figures in the alcove. They smiled encouragement. His throat was dry. He moistened his lips and said softly.

"The answer is obvious. There is no difference. Therefore, I have no preference."

A small almost imperceptible ticking seemed to begin somewhere in his head.

Ballard and Benson nodded. "Fine," Ballard said. "That's all for now, Weber. There can still be emotional reactions. You'll be placed under survey."

I'm sorry that it had to be so harsh. I'm glad, however, that you did give the most rational possible answer. Maria will be waiting for you." The panel closed.

Weber left and met Maria outside in the garden. She was in his arms

quickly. He was holding her tightly and she was warm, comforting...the warm familiarity of her lips...the softness of her fingers on his face...but the words came out unconsciously, not to her particularly. They just came out... "You are—Maria—?"

It was foolish to ask such a thing. "Oh, darling, darling," she sobbed. "It was terrible for me, but not so bad as it must have been for you. I didn't want to, but I knew you'd pass the test all right, and that was all that mattered. Congratulations, Marc. You're a leader in the most important bureau in the world!"

She turned her face away. He said nothing. Finally they began walking aimlessly across the park grounds. He kept looking at her out of the corner of his eyes.

But he had made a choice. It didn't matter whether it was Maria or not. They were the same, exactly the same.

"I'm so glad for you, Marc," she was saying. "Your answer was perfect, and all that emotional conflict, Marc! You were magnificent—and I'm so—glad!"

THAT WAS what she said, but the words didn't ring quite true. Nor was he particularly glad. The thought filtered into his mind: This is Maria. But—even if it isn't—even if this is the other, the synthetic, the robotic, it doesn't make any difference. Does it? Does it!

A difference that makes no difference is no difference. He laughed softly and there was a slight release of tension. It was a wonderful night, and she laughed with him, and he was happy. For a while.

And then, a few days later, he started to realize that there was a difference. He couldn't find it, he didn't know what it was, it was nowhere and it was everywhere, this difference, yet it was intangible, and even immeasurable, but he knew it was there—the difference.

So now he had the knife, the knife that would allow him to know. The knife that could measure. The knife that could be sure.

The music of the fountain sang to

him softly from beneath the bedroom window, the room in which she, the thing, lay.

The lights were soft, multicolored from the spraying mist of the fountain, like the music, shifting and trembling, fountain singing softly and gently and far away. "Ocean and fountain, shadow and tree, nothing escapes, nothing is free..."

And then, inside the apartment, in her room, the lights here were soft too, like the music of the unceasing fountain.

Outwardly, she is a beautiful creation, he thought. But that's because she so greatly resembles Maria. So beautiful, yes but could you measure it? There was non-metricized methodology too, and why hadn't he considered that?

Whatever you are, I've got to know. He raised the knife.

I've got to know, even if you're really Maria, I've got to know that, too. I suspect, you understand me, whatever you are? But I'm not sure. Uncertainty is the most maddening thing of all. If you are Maria, and I know you're not, or are you?—then you must realize that so much uncertainty is impossible to bear.

You've acted the same, just the same as the other, as Maria, if you aren't Maria. No measurable difference that I could see. I'm pretty certain you aren't Maria. What have they done with her? Murdered her probably, or sent her far away from me. But you're synthetic, built up in a laboratory. You're just part of a test in logic.

Scientists, departments, bureaus, they observed, verified, that makes it scientific. That there was no difference. My answer was logical enough—if the postulates were correct. *If there really is no difference.*

Maybe it can't be measured but I am aware of it. I know you aren't Maria, and I'll prove it. I'll first prove it to myself, then to the scientists, the departments, the bureaus.

He raised the knife higher and bent down. He lowered the knife's point until it hovered an inch from the throbbing vein in her throat.

And then she opened her eyes and looked at him.

He started violently. It was plain that she hadn't been asleep. She had been waiting. Her eyes tumbled into terrible clarity. She cried out.

"Marc—darling Marc—God help us!"

Then she screamed loudly. There was immediate response and he knew that her cry was a signal, that this was a trap. He tried to plunge the knife down, but an arm clutched at him, dragged him away. He turned, struck out with ferocious savagery, smashing with hardened fist, battering, yelling his defiance. More hands, the sure deft hands of lab-men, gripped his wrists, his arms, his waist, his ankles. Hands appeared with needles, he scarcely felt the thrust of hypos. He scarcely cared about the lethargy flowing into his blood, into his brain—or about the fire flowing from his heart.

ALL REALITY changed for him then. He screamed his hatred and defiance, but his voice was a dying whisper. The things around him, the things that mattered, it all crumbled and fell away, shattered in a million tinkling shards, glittering, broken shards that spun apart and away into a giggling chaotic wonderland.....

Her voice was brittle. "Well, can't he be cured now, at all?"

"No," Benson said wearily. "Not at all, Maria. He's through, a martyr to the advancement of glorious science. It's advanced paranoia. He insists that we're persecuting him still. That we deliberately wrecked his life."

"Well," she said softly, "didn't we?"

Ballard shifted his eyes in an uneasy scowl. "In a way we did." He looked sharply up at Maria. "The scanners show that you're taking it with almost a hundred percent integration. But the neuro-bands show a tinge of unbalance, Maria. Feel all right?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I feel strange, like someone about to become lost in a dark wood. It was all for the Bureau. I loved Marc of course, but I loved him only as a future scientist who would become

valuable to the Bureau and to humanity. But he failed, therefore—"

Benson pressed his eyes and sighed. "He failed for you," he said. "That's why you were chosen by the Bureau to fall in love with him and marry him, as part of the Test. A man's love for a woman is the most stringent possible emotional test. And in this case—he loved you—very much."

"Yes," she said, "I know."

"You answer well," Ballard said. "Evidently you've passed the Test with great success where he failed. He didn't know you were also trying for a position in the Field Bureau. He believed all that mysticism pretense of yours...."

"Yes," Benson said. "You seem to have passed the Test well."

Her face was suddenly hard, like white stone. "Thanks, Benson," she said then. "Poor Marc never suspected until I told him that I was part of the Test, and then he never realized the full significance. He was influenced by the emotional ideas you ordered me to give him. I pounded it in pretty strongly. Love, beauty, intangible things that bound us, you know. Especially, he liked my imagery about the—fountain. I think he grew to believe in love, and perhaps even in the—soul. But who knows? It's too late now to tell...too late."

Ballard shrugged. "We had to do it. Mysticism was his one weakness, and we had to find out how strong it was."

Her eyes shifted. "He was—in love with me," she said softly. "And that's why he didn't suspect the plot. And after the test, he lived in a hell of uncertainty and doubt that was a result of constant conflict with what he knew had to be true."

She got up from the table, stood up very straight. "Well, gentlemen," she said then. "If you've screened me, and I show so little disintegration, then I've passed the Test."

Benson nodded. "You've passed—so far. But one never knows. Someday, more and more will pass far more stringent tests. But we have a

(Please Turn To Page 62)

THE GIRL WHO PRAC-

CHAPTER I

THE KASSIR Wind was mourning in out of the desert that day that Emmett Walton entered the Tower of Haffal in the

Martian city of Kul Minen. The Tower was an immense structure built out of black stone that must have been transported here from the distant Eral Mountains ages ago. There was a sense of oldness, of

From twenty throats came the savage, bestial cry, "G'nah! G'nah!"

**COULD THE EARTH-
MAN SAVE THE
OTHER-WORLD
ENCHANTRESS FROM
HER UNSPEAKABLE
DOOM?**



TISED AKLAT by H. A. De Rosso

It was funny. After thirty-two Earth-years of helling up and down the space lanes, he had to fall in love with a woman on Mars, the planet he hated above all others. Where Emmett Walton knew that even now the Martians were returning inevitably to the ghastly custom of their kind — Aklat!



**GRIPPING
NOVELET OF STRANGE
SACRIFICE THAT WILL
KEEP YOU IN SUSPENSE!**

tiredness, of ever-hovering death, the sense that was the essence of the planet Mars, and it evoked a sad, dull feeling in Walton as he walked down the long, vaulted corridors, his shoes sounding hollowly, forlornly on the black stones of the floor.

Beside him strode Lieutenant Thorne who had met Walton at the spaceport on the desert sands at the edge of Kul Minen. Thorne was resplendent and handsome in his gray uniform of the Interplanetary Control Guard. He had been on Mars

only six months and he was still jaunty and high-spirited but he had four and a half years to go on his enlistment and Mars would eventually have its way with him, Walton thought, just like it had its way with every Earthman who stayed long enough on the planet.

"How does it feel to be back on Mars, Walton?" Thorne was asking. "You were here before, weren't you?"

"Three years ago," said Walton, thinking that to him it seemed much longer than that. "I spent seven years in and around Saritsa on the other side of the planet."

"One of the pioneer inspectors of Interplanetary Intelligence," murmured Thorne, casting a sidelong glance at Walton. "You don't look so old, Walton."

Walton smiled a little. "I was a young punk of twenty-two. I thought I knew everything. But I had a lot to learn. Seven years on Mars taught me a little something. The planet looked glamorous and enticing when I first came here."

"How does it look to you now?" asked Thorne, grinning.

"It stinks of death and rot!"

The grin became lopsided on Thorne's face. His eyes were incredulous. "How come you've returned then?"

Walton sighed. "I go wherever IPI sends me. That's my job, my business. I keep telling myself I'm going to get out of it before I get old in it but I keep putting it off. I dunno. I guess after a while it gets in your blood."

They came to an immense door rising twenty-five feet in height. Walton had always considered Martian architecture monstrous. Whoever had built these ancient cities eons ago had had the flair for immensity. Every structure, every room had ceilings approximately thirty feet above the floor, giving the impression that a race of giants had constructed these edifices. But according to ancient records and anthropological research, the tallest men to inhabit Mars had been nine feet in height. Walton had always felt small and inconsequential in

these huge Martian buildings.

Lieutenant Thorne pushed a small scarlet button in the wall and the huge door opened soundlessly. "The lion's den," he murmured, grinning at Walton. "The louder he roars the bigger his hangover. Coming, Walton?"

THIS ROOM, too, was immense. At the far end was a sort of dais with steps leading up the sides and atop this, behind a gray steel desk, sat a man. Light through a high window streamed down on his gray hair and his red face with its bilious eyes and stern, embittered mouth.

Lieutenant Thorne halted at the foot of the dais and saluted smartly. The man behind the desk returned the salute with an indolent wave of his hand.

"Colonel Bassett" said Thorne, "this is Emmett Walton of Interplanetary Intelligence."

"How do you do, Walton," said Colonel Bassett, his eyes going slowly, calculatingly over Walton's six foot, lean, hard frame. "That will be all, Lieutenant."

After Thorne had gone, Bassett said, "You may come up here, Walton."

Walton mounted the dais. Standing in front of the desk, he could smell the faint odor of liquor on Bassett's breath. The man looked even older, wearier this close. Walton remembered that at one time Bassett had been a Major-General on Earth. There had been bureaucratic and inter-service squabbles and Bassett had been broken in rank and sent to Mars as governor-general of the city of Kul Minen. To Bassett, this was a bitter exile.

"So IPI sent you," said Bassett, his eyes holding a sneer. "I told them there was no need. Everything in Kul Minen is in order."

"Including the deaths of twenty-three Guards?" asked Walton softly.

The flush on Bassett's face deepened. His mouth tightened.

"That's a normal consequence of occupation. These Martians naturally resent our presence here, they re-

sent our taking over their planet even though we leave a token impotent government in their hands. It's true there was no resistance when Earth took over the planet twenty-five years ago but that was only because there was no effective central government on Mars. Each city was autonomous and so we were able to conquer the planet without violence.

"Oh, there have been a few scattered rebellions but they never amounted to anything. However, there is no such thing in Kul Minen. Because a few Guards have been killed, that does not indicate there is any underground movement against us. In any army of occupation you'll find a few empty-headed fools who'll go out and get drunk on native liquor and pop off and make passes at native women and get themselves killed. That is the situation in Kul Minen, Walton. There is no need for an IPI man here."

"IPI headquarters thinks different," said Walton. "Hasn't the manner of these killings struck you as strange, Colonel?"

Bassett's eyes narrowed. "You mean the mutilation of the bodies? That's just the Martian way of venting hate and resentment on outsiders."

Walton sighed. He had never been able to see this idea of sending embittered, broken military men to command on a dismal planet. What was needed in places like this was a man who volunteered for the service and came eager and willing to study and understand a planet and its peoples.

"Have you ever heard of Aklat, Colonel?" asked Walton.

"Aklat?" said Bassett. "What's Aklat?"

"IPI believes that the easiest way of getting at the root of trouble on an alien planet is to make a thorough study of the people and their customs and beliefs and legends and history. We are prone to look at the ways of Martians, for instance, from the viewpoint of Earthmen. To really understand Martians, we've got

to look at them from the viewpoint of Martians."

Bassett emitted a disgusted snort. "That's the standard lecture that's delivered to all new Guard recruits. I know it by heart, Walton."

WALTON'S lips tightened. He felt a bit of anger begin in him but he let it pass. "This is where Aklat comes in," he went on levelly. "Aklat was originally practiced here in Kul Minen and other Martian cities several thousand years ago. The Martians of those days enjoyed a much higher degree of civilization than those of today but, nevertheless, they were a cruel and barbarous people. They were also fatalists. They believed that the number of days a man was to live was ordained the moment of his birth.

"They also believed that if a healthy young man or woman were to be killed ahead of his allotted life-span and if his remaining life-span could somehow be transferred to another individual, that individual would live out not only his life-span but the remaining life-span of the Aklat victim. It's on the order of those cannibals on Earth, Colonel, who believed that by eating the heart of a brave enemy warrior they would acquire his courage. In Aklat, the heart and liver of the victim was made into a paste which was swallowed by the individual who wanted to prolong his life-span."

"Martian fairy tales," said Bassett, eyes derisive. "Every Martian is a congenital liar. Listen to them and they'll tell you one whopper bigger than the other."

A small needling anger began picking at Walton's brain. But he told himself he had to be patient. Bassett wasn't the first pig-headed military man Walton had encountered in his work.

"You will admit, Colonel," he said in a voice taut with control, "that the hearts and livers had been removed from the bodies of those twenty-three Guards."

"What of it?" said Bassett. "These Martians of Kul Minen are much too intelligent to believe in a silly thing

like Aklat. Besides, why should they want to live longer? They already have a longer life-span than Earthmen."

"I know," said Walton wearily. "Measured in Earth time a Martian lives longer. The Earth year is 365 days, the Martian equivalent, or ree, is 686 days. We on Earth have an average life-span of seventy-one years. The Martian average life-span is forty-six rees, which actually is longer than Earth's life-span."

"But a Martian is not interested in measuring his existence according to Earth's standards. I know we still follow Earth's time measurements here on Mars and also on Venus. The five-year enlistment of the Guards is five Earth years and not five Martian rees. But, Colonel, that means nothing to a Martian. Mars is a dying planet. The life-span on Mars is constantly diminishing. In ancient times, as the records reveal, Martians lived from 120 to 130 rees."

"Haven't you ever noticed, Colonel, the pride a Martian reveals when he attains fifty or more rees? He is looked up to, he is venerated and almost worshipped by the younger Martians. All Martians are obsessed with the thought of increasing their life-span and eventually regaining their old life-span of 120 or more rees. It's a natural reaction of a dying planet and its dying peoples, Colonel!"

BASSETT WAVED a deprecating hand. "If it were true that Aklat was being practiced, it would have been carried on on a larger scale. Those twenty-three deaths are over a period of a year, Walton. That's hardly anything to get excited about."

"IPI is convinced that this Aklat is being practiced by only a small group and merely as an experiment. As you pointed out, modern Martians probably don't believe in Aklat but it's worth trying, isn't it, since they have nothing to lose? If by some chance Aklat does work, or if some of those practicing Aklat with Earth victims actually achieve a longer life-

span even though Aklat has nothing to do with it, think of the consequences. The whole planet will rise, not in rebellion, but to kill Earthmen for Aklat so that Martians might live longer lives. That is what IPI is worried about, Colonel. They want Aklat stopped before any Martians become convinced that Aklat with Earth victims actually prolongs life!"

Bassett was getting restless. "All right, Walton," he said. "I can't stop you from carrying on your pointless, stupid investigation. IPI men are above the jurisdiction of the Guard but let me tell you this. Don't bother me any more with your ridiculous stories. You will confine your reports and requests to Lieutenant Thorne and my other subordinates. That is all, Walton!..."

The officers of the Interplanetary Control Guards were housed in the Tower of Haffal. Each room was so large that three officers of the same rank were assigned to its quarters. Lieutenant Thorne invited Walton to bunk with him. Thorne explained that his two room-mates were on duty at the Lobol Mines and would not return for another two weeks.

Walton liked the young, handsome lieutenant. In Thorne, Walton happened to see himself as he was ten years ago, before his job of probing into the corruptness and greed and evil and perverseness of men had soured him and changed his outlook into one of skeptical pessimism.

Thorne had changed into a new, trim uniform and was humming gaily as he made a last meticulous adjustment of the front-and-rear visored Guard helmet that was burnished until it shone like raw gold.

"Got a date, Lieutenant?" asked Walton, smiling.

Thorne closed his eyes and drew a deep, ecstatic breath. "Ah, there beautiful, uninhibited Martian women. There's nothing like them on Earth. Why have you soured on this planet, Walton? I love it here. When my five years are up I'm signing up for five more without time off for a breather on Earth."

Walton's smile grew slight. "Maybe it's because I don't have a Martian

woman like you, Thorne. What is her name? Where does she live?"

"Oh, no," said Thorne, holding up a hand. "I'm not that green any more, Walton. There aren't too many Martian women and I learned the hard way how it goes. You meet one and give out her name and address and you have a dozen pals beating your time with her. You'll have to find your own girl, Walton..."

CHAPTER II

WALTON WENT out into the Martian night alone. Overhead, Phobos and Deimos laid their bright, cold glares on Mars. The Kassir Wind still mourned, abysmally chill now as it came in over the red sands of the desert, carrying in its moaning voice a lamenting requiem for the greatness and glory that had once been Mars.

Walton hugged the ankle-length gafir robe tighter about him as he faced into the wind. The streets, like the buildings on Mars, were immense, ranging from fifty to a hundred feet in width. Again the feeling came to Walton that giants must have constructed these cities but the records stated emphatically that this was not so.

Walton walked along, listening to the small, lonesome clicking of his heels on the black cobblestones. Under the light of the twin moons, the city held the husbed, depressing air of a tomb. There were not many people about but this did not surprise Walton. Despite the tremendous size of Martian cities, the inhabitants were few in number. Kul Minen was no exception.

All the Martians that Walton saw were attired in the same manner as he—a long gafir robe that covered them from neck to toes. Some of the Martians walked, others rode upon gafirs. Gafirs were about the size of mules. They were used as beasts of burden, a means of transportation and a source of food and drink and clothing.

Occasionally, a jet-jeep passed, hissing gently, carrying a pair of Guards on patrol.

Most of the buildings that Walton passed showed no lights. They reared immense and empty, monuments to the dreams and skills of the past and to the despairing futility of the future. A vast feeling of depression descended on Walton. He had had his fill of this planet in the seven years he had spent in Saritsa. He had returned to Earth for a rest and with a request for a stint of service on Venus but then this hint of Aklat had turned up in Kul Minen and IPI had returned him here. Walton cursed softly. This was positively the last job for him. He and IPI were through when this was done.

Walton finally turned into a Martian inn. The script on the black stones beside the huge doorway proclaimed this place to be L'fao's Haven of Exquisite Joys. Walton narrowed his eyes against the bright flickering of the Kindor lights and made his way to an empty table in a corner where his back would be to the wall and from where he could observe all who entered and left the place.

He settled himself on the stool and opened the front of his robe. He gave an automatic pat on the handle on the Evans pistol in the holster at his left hip and then looked the immense room over. About half of the tables had customers, talking over the varied Martian drinks. In a far corner an orchestra was playing the harsh, mournful music of Mars which grated against Walton's ears and nerves.

"May I be of some service to you, g'nula?"

Walton started. The girl had come up so silently he had not been aware of her until she had spoken and he told himself he would have to be more careful in the future. These Martians had a way of sneaking up on a man that Walton had never liked.

THE GIRL stood with head bowed in deference and respect. He could not see her face too well but Walton saw that she was one of the alabaster-skinned, black-

haired types that were native to Kul Minen. She wore a plain black robe that whispered against the floor.

"A drink of h'lal," said Walton, and watched her as she disappeared silently, almost phantom-like in a dark passageway in the opposite wall. In a short while she was back, carrying a tall, slim opaque glass filled with the green liquor that was h'lal.

"What, no peral stick?" said Walton.

Her head remained bowed. "I am of the impression you Earthmen do not like peral, g'nula," she said in a low, throaty voice.

"I am not of the Guards," said Walton, "nor am I a drunkard. Besides, I like peral."

"Forgive me, g'nula," she whispered. Again she was gone and soon returned. She placed a small bowl filled with a white powder on the table and a tiny brown stick the size of a toothpick.

Walton took the stick, dipped it in the green h'lal, then rolled the wet stick in the peral powder. He placed the stick in his mouth, sucked off the powder which was bitter-sweet in taste, then immediately drank the h'lal.

"Will you have another drink of h'lal, g'nula?" asked the girl.

"Eventually," said Walton, laying an oblong Martian coin on the table.

"Our h'lal is very good, is it not?"
"Won't you have another one, g'nula?"

Walton could not help a small grin. "What's the matter, you need a new Easter hat? All right, bring me another h'lal."

Walton did not drink this one right away. He knew the potency of h'lal, especially if peral were not taken with it. Most Earthmen scorned peral, believing they could handle the mild-tasting h'lal alone. But without peral, h'lal started an insatiable craving for more and more h'lal.

When the girl saw that Walton was not going to take his drink immediately she sat down on a stool beside him. "Can I be of any other service to you, g'nula?" she asked, eyes still lowered respectfully.

Walton stared at her. In the flick-

ering Kindor lights her white-skinned face looked hauntingly beautiful. Her eyes and hair were as black as the stones from the Eral Mountains. Her lips were thin and a delicate pink in color. Staring at her, Walton felt something stir in him.

"This L'fao must be awful hungry to make you girls work so hard," he said. He threw several coins on the table. "Here. Take these, and I don't want more h'lal or any other 'services.'"

She shook her head. "It is not proper," she said primly. "It is not proper to accept money without giving something in return, g'nula."

Walton grinned. "Well, you can sit and talk with me. That's something in return, isn't it?"

"But you must buy more h'lal."

Still grinning, Walton lifted his glass and poured the h'lal on the floor. "Another h'lal," he said. "Does that clear your conscience, Ma Barker?"

SHE SMILED, a sudden flash that was poignantly beautiful, and Walton kept seeing that smile all the while until she returned with another drink. She seated herself and drew her stool closer to his. She was looking at him in an eager, openly curious way now, her deference all gone.

"When did you arrive from Earth, g'nula?" she asked.

"Forget that g'nula business. I am called Walton. How are you called?"

"Ayanna, g'nula—Walton."

They laughed together at that. Walton felt some of the depression, some of the bitterness leave him. Hearing her throaty laugh, he began to feel that Mars might not be such a bad place after all. The trouble with him, he thought, was that he stuck too much to business. He should have fun more often.

"I arrived this morning on the Phobos."

She frowned slightly. "Only this morning? Why, you speak without accent and the way you drink h'lal and the way you act—. I don't believe you, Walton."

He smiled a little. "Oh, I've been

on Mars before. I spent four rees in Saritsa and then returned to Earth. Now I am back on Mars again."

"Saritsa? Oh? And what did you do in Saritsa?"

Walton's eyes narrowed. He felt the old caution, the old distrust sweep over him, but he decided the query was innocent enough. She was just making conversation.

Nevertheless, he said, "I'm a trader. I buy gafir hides and ship them to Earth. The people of Earth value gafir hides most highly."

"But Kul Minen is a poor place to purchase gafir hides. All our gafirs are brought in from Har Binen across the Scarlet Desert."

You're not so dumb, baby, Walton thought. You use your head for something else than making talk and looking pretty.... He reached over and chucked her chin.

"Do you want to know the truth, Ayanna?" he said softly. "I came to Kul Minen because I was told that the most beautiful woman on the planet lives here. That woman is you, Ayanna. Now that I have seen I can die happy."

She chuckled in a pleased, happy way. "No gafir herder ever spoke like that, Walton. Gafir herders stink and wear filthy clothes and use coarse, vulgar language."

"I am not a gafir herder," he said. "I merely buy the hides. I do not soil my hands with work. That is why I smell nice and use polite language and say pretty, flattering things."

She opened her mouth to speak, then abruptly closed it. Walton glanced up and saw the Martian standing in front of the table. He had approached soundlessly. He had the same alabaster skin and black hair as the girl but there was a touch of age in the large veins on the backs of his pale hands.

There was something regal and proud in his bearing and even a touch of insolence in his eyes as he looked down at Walton. Walton returned the stare coolly. The girl had risen to her feet. "Will you have more h'lal, g'nula?" she asked in that

impersonal, deferential tone.

"Eventually," said Walton, still staring at the Martian.

Slowly, indolently, Walton picked up his peral stick, dipped it in the h'lal, then rolled it in the peral powder. Placing the stick in his mouth, he sucked on it daintily, then swiftly raised the glass of h'lal and downed the drink with one swallow.

"Now you may bring me another h'lal," he said.

THE GIRL picked up the glass and left. The Martian looked down at Walton with a wary respect now in his black eyes. "You drink h'lal prudently, g'nula," he said quietly.

"I am a prudent man," said Walton.

The Martian bowed, fawningly and yet with a touch of mockery. "I have come to your table, g'nula, to welcome you and to invite you to partake of the services I offer. I am L'fao."

"I'm Walton."

He watched the girl coming swiftly, noiselessly toward the table. He gave her a coin and said. "I wish no more h'lal or other services. But I shall call upon you again—when you are not working."

She showed him a small smile, then left without a word. Walton looked challengingly at L'fao. The Martian bowed again. "What my girls do when they are not working is none of my affair, but I do insist that they concentrate strictly on business while in my hire."

The door opened and a man in the uniform of the Guards entered. He was obviously under the weather. His tunic was open halfway down his chest despite the cold of night. He had lost his helmet and his hair was all mussed up. He came lurching in, bringing up sharply against a table and sending it smashing over.

"H'lal!" he bellowed, staggering away from the upset table. "Oh, you beautiful dolls, bring me some h'lal."

L'fao had wheeled and was staring intently at the Guard. Walton felt a bit of anger stir inside him. It was boors like this Guard who strained

taut relations on an alien planet to the breaking point.

One of the girls came up to the Guard with h'lal and peral bowl. With a wrathful hand he knocked the peral bowl aside and grabbed the glass and downed the contents with an immense gulp.

"I don't want any of your stinking, sissy peral powder," he proclaimed loudly, weaving on his feet. "I can handle h'lal. I can handle any stinking drink in the universe. I'm not a gutless coward like all you Martians. I am a man! I am from Earth!" he shouted, pounding on his chest.

L'fao began moving quietly across the room toward the Guard. This individual began staggering among the tables. Suddenly he threw back his head and let out a harsh, chilling, fearful cry.

"G'nah! G'nah!"

There was a swift movement in the far shadows beyond the reach of the Kindor lights. Walton's hand closed about the grip of his Evans pistol. Again the cry from the Guard.

"G'nah! G'nah!"

Now Walton saw them, moving into the reach of the light. Five tall, green-skinned men with burning, scarlet eyes. The flickering lights winked and flashed on the long, burnished swords in their hands. These were the Q'nefi, Walton knew, primitive men who had been slaves until the Earthmen had conquered Mars and freed them. But the Q'nefi had kept right on working for their old masters. That savage, guttural cry was the Q'nefi war cry.

L'fao had signaled to one of the girls and she came up swiftly with a glass of h'lal. L'fao took it from her and said to the Guard's back, "H'lal, oh, Earthman. With the compliments of L'fao."

The Guard whirled. He weaved and almost fell but he clutched L'fao's black robe and steadied himself. "Well, if it ain't old L'fao," the Guard cried, slapping the Martian on the back. "Say, did you hear me give that Q'nefi war cry? Pretty, good, wasn't it? Listen. 'G'nah!

G'nah!' Ho-ho-ho. How's that, L'fao?"

AT A SLIGHT signal from L'fao the green Q'nefi had disappeared into the shadows. L'fao said, "Your h'lal, oh, Earthman."

"Say, you're all right, L'fao," said the Guard, grabbing the glass. "You're one good Martian. I like coming to your place. Well, here's bumps."

The Guard gulped his drink. In the Kindor lights, Walton saw the color drain from the fellow's face. His hands lifted to his throat. For a moment Walton thought the drink had been drugged but there was no telling how much h'lal the Guard had consumed and without peral this was a natural result.

"I got to get some air," the Guard muttered. He began stumbling toward the door. Two girls ran up, one on each side, steadying him as he plunged for the door. The girls were instantly back and Walton could imagine the Guard retching agonizingly.

Walton waited perhaps five minutes then, his fourth h'lal untouched, he left L'fao's. Outside he expected to find the Guard sprawled senseless on the black cobblestones but there was no sign of the man. From up the street came the sound of an Earth voice lifted in ribald song. In the light of the twin moons Walton saw the Guard staggering happily on his way. The man had remarkable recuperative powers, Walton thought.

He crossed the wide street and then proceeded in the same direction as the drunken Guard. A vast uneasiness settled over Walton as he moved slowly along, hugging the thick shadows close to the black walls. In his dark gafir robe he knew he would be unperceived to any one across the street.

The street was utterly deserted. An awesome, prescient silence, broken only by the ribald singing of the Guard, lay over this part of the city. The Guard stumbled and went to his knees but his singing continued unabated as he lurched to his feet again and started on.

Walton walked perhaps a mile, passing no one on the way. His uneasiness grew. He could not shake the hunch that something was going to happen. He drew the Evans pistol from its holster and held it in his hand under the robe.

The two men struck suddenly, erupting out of the doorway of a black, forbidding building. Phobos-light glittered brightly on the burnished blades of their swords as they rushed at the unsuspecting Guard.

Walton whipped his robe open. The Evans pistol thrust out. He pressed the trigger. The Evans emitted a gentle hiss as a streak of flame leaped from the muzzle. Again Walton pressed the trigger and another bolt of fire flashed across the street.

One of the sword-wielders dropped silently. The other fell kicking and screaming, his agonized cries starting eerie, horrible echoes among the vast, silent buildings. Abruptly these shrieks ceased but the echoes went on screaming a while.

There was cold sweat on Walton's face as he ran across the street. Somewhere near a siren began to wail. A Guard patrol in a jet-jeep, Walton thought, relieved. He stopped and looked down at the two men he had killed. They were green Q'nefi.

Walton lifted hot eyes to the befuddled Guard who had stopped singing and was standing there, staring stupidly, uncomprehendingly at the dead Q'nefi. The siren was very near.

"I ought to beat your drunken brains out," said Walton through his teeth..."

CHAPTER III

THE NEXT day Ayanna called for Walton at the Tower of Haffal. He was surprised and pleased. "When you said you were going to call on me," she explained demurely, "you did not ask where I lived. So I came to you."

Walton's eyes narrowed. "How did you know where to find me?"

"Oh, everyone in Kul Minen knows

who you are now after you killed those two Q'nefi."

Walton felt the anger knot his guts. Silently, he began cursing the drunken Guard. All the subterfuge was gone. Now he could no longer work undercover. That made the job more difficult and longer to finish.

Walton borrowed a jet-jeep and rode with Ayanna out to the edge of the city. The red desert, vast and shimmering and terrifyingly beautiful, stretched before them. For a long while the two of them stared out over the red sands, neither of them saying anything. Finally, Ayanna shuddered and seemed to shrink on the seat beside Walton.

"It's horrible," she said in a low, quivering voice. "Everywhere you look on Mars there is death. Once this was a green planet like Earth, Walton. We had green fields everywhere and immense oceans and seas. All that is recorded in our old books. Then someone invented a horrible weapon of war in using it our seas dried up and the greenness went out of the ground and over half of the people of Mars were wiped out. Since then the planet has never been the same. Our life-span has been growing shorter and shorter. We are a dying people, Walton."

He could see the dull, whipped look in her eyes, the look all Martians had, only in Ayanna right now it was starker and grimmer than any Walton had ever seen. It made her look like an old, old woman. The look offset the beauty of her features. She was old and ugly and suddenly Walton found himself hating Mars more than he had ever hated it.

She turned toward him with a desperate appeal. "Tell me about Earth, Walton. Tell me about green fields and oceans and living. Tell me about Earth."

"I don't think it would do you much good, Ayanna," he said slowly, sadly.

The whipped look grew stronger in her eyes and she averted her face a little. "No, I don't think it would," she agreed. "I have always wanted to go to Earth. Ever since I first heard it described I've wanted to

live on Earth. I've wanted to lie on green grass and look up at your blue skies. I've wanted to lie on the shore of a great sea and let the water wash over me. But I know that will never be for me."

Walton could feel it tugging at his heart. "Maybe it can be arranged, Ayanna," he said gently.

Her eyes were suddenly skeptically hopeful. "Do you mean it, Walton? Will you take me with you back to Earth?"

He could not understand what had prompted him to say it. He knew only how he felt in his heart. "I can arrange it, Ayanna. If you would go with me."

"Oh, I will, I will," she cried. "I will mate with no one but you, Walton."

Then she was in his arms, his mouth crushed down on hers, and Walton knew this was what he had waited so long for, this was why no other woman had moved him. Finally he took his mouth away and looked down into her flushed face, thinking with a cynical humor that after thirty-two years of living he had to fall in love with a woman from Mars, the planet he hated so much.

"How soon will it be, Walton?" she asked.

"I have my job to finish first. Then I'm going to resign from IPI. I'm getting too old and bitter for the work."

"Resign now. Let us return to Earth today. Let us take the first spaceship out of Kul Minen. Please, Walton."

He smiled gently down at her. "I won't quit until I'm through with my job. It's a matter of pride with me, Ayanna. I don't want to quit with a job half-finished. It won't be too long."

There was an urgent appeal in her eyes. She pressed herself close against him, the warmth and firmness of her demandingly insistent. "There's nothing here for you, Walton. There's only death and loneliness on Mars. Please take me away now. Please say you'll resign now and take me with you to Earth on the next ship. Please, Walton?"

He laid his fingers gently over her mouth and smiled softly down at her. "You can wait a while longer, Ayanna. Then we'll have the rest of our lives to enjoy on Earth. I'll find you the greenest spot on the planet, a spot on the edge of the sea, and we'll live the rest of our lives there, Ayanna. How does that sound to you?..."

CHAPTER IV

THE KASSIR WIND was mourning again, bitterly cold as it moaned in off the desert. Walton dismounted from the jeep about a quarter-mile from L'fao's Haven of Exquisite Joys. He gave a final briefing to the captain in charge of this detail of the Guard and then Walton proceeded on foot, his long, black gafir robe hugged tightly about him.

Ayanna came smiling to his table. The smile quickly vanished when she saw the look on Walton's face. "Send L'fao to me," Walton said. "Then you clear out of here, Ayanna, you hear me?"

She hesitated, staring inquisitively at him. "Quickly now," Walton snapped.

Beneath the gafir robe, Walton's hand rested on the grip of his Evans pistol. In the shadows the Martian band rendered its blashing, lamenting music. The Kindor lights flickered.

L'fao came up quietly, seeming to materialize out of shadow, a mocking deference in his bow. "Welcome to L'fao's, Walton. Did you wish to see me?"

"Sit down, L'fao," said Walton, his lips thinning.

A flash of resentment at Walton's tone showed in the Martian's eyes but he seated himself at the table across from Walton. Mockery edged L'fao's voice.

"Command and I obey, oh, Earthman."

Walton settled back a little on his stool. The wall was at his back. From this point he had a full view of the immense room. He tried probing the far shadows for sign of Q'nefi but nothing visible stirred.

Walton stared at the pale hands of L'fao resting on the table. The large, prominent veins were the only signs of the Martian's age. His hair was as black as Eral stone. Very few Martians greyed with age but perhaps that was because of their now shortened life-span, Walton thought.

Walton said, "How many rees have you, L'fao?"

The Martian drew himself up perceptibly. "I have sixty-one rees," he said pridefully.

"That's fifteen rees beyond the average Martian life-span," said Walton. "What do you attribute it to, L'fao? Clean living and all that sort of thing?"

L'fao's dark eyes glittered uglily. "You mock me, Earthling!"

Walton's voice became a soft, insinuating murmur. "Or do you attribute it to Aklat?"

If the thing surprised him, L'fao made no show of it. "Aklat?" he asked quietly. "Don't be absurd, Walton."

Walton could feel the wrath begin to simmer in him. His voice thinned. "Listen, L'fao, I'm throwing the whole thing in front of you. Those two Q'nefi I killed six days ago were traced back to you. Why did they attack the Guard?"

THE MARTIAN shrugged. "How should I know? I am not responsible for what my employees do in their hours away from my place. I can not be held to account for that. As for reasons, can't you think of any, Walton? Many of us on Mars are tired of Earth rule. We resent your overbearing ways, your exploitation of our planet for the profit of the peoples of Earth. Some of us resent most vehemently. Those two dead Q'nefi boys had plenty of motives for attacking a member of the Interplanetary Control Guard."

"Was one of the motives Aklat?"

The Martian's eyes glared uglily. "Aklat? Forget Aklat, Walton."

"But it was Aklat, wasn't it?"

L'fao drew a deep breath. His nostrils dilated with wrath but his voice remained even. "I don't know where

you got that silly idea about Aklat, Walton. For your information, the Q'nefi never practiced Aklat. There is no indication in any of the records of the Q'nefi practicing Aklat."

"I didn't say the Q'nefi practiced Aklat. I'm saying they merely procured the victims."

L'fao was silent a moment. His dark eyes regarded Walton with a chill calculation. Then a scornful smirk twisted the Martian's lips. "Are you inferring that I practice Aklat?"

"It took you a long time but you finally caught on, L'fao. Good for you. You're smarter than I thought."

The Martian rose up halfway from his stool, face flushing. "You will mock me once too often, Earthling," he spat through his teeth. Then with a visible effort at control he sank back on his stool.

"I should think, Walton," he went on slowly, "that you would consider me intelligent enough not to believe in an ancient, stupid superstition. I am a realist and a fatalist. I do not believe in Aklat nor Boa-Kir nor the teaching of Califoa. Moreover, there is no one else practicing Aklat. You should study up on the ritual of Aklat, Walton. If you did that, you would learn that the ritual was most elaborate and public. It extended over a period of ten days. It involved public parades with the intended victims, a visit to every threshold in the city, and a public sacrifice and a public eating of Aklat. It was most implicitly specified that there be no variation in the ritual if Aklat were to be invoked. How can you tie in the deaths of a few Guards with anything as elaborate and as dead as Aklat?"

The wrath began to claw at Walton's entrails. His throat thickened with the stern emotions that rose in him. "Look, L'fao. I hate this job, I hate this planet. I want to finish my work as soon as I can so I can resign from IPI and return to Earth, there to stay. I hate Mars, I hate every single stinking Martian, every stinking building, every stinking stone and grain of sand.

"There was a young lieutenant of the Guard, L'fao, a Lieutenant

Thorne. Two nights ago he disappeared. No trace of him has been found. That means Aklat. Up to now, because you thought you were getting away with it, you left the bodies of your victims where they could be found, to befuddle the Earthlings and as a sign of contempt for Earth rule. Then you learned of my presence here. You learned that IPI had found out about ancient Aklat. So now, of course, you have taken to hiding the bodies of your victims.

"Lieutenant Thorne was a nice boy, L'fao. I liked him. I'm going to find out what happened to him if I have to tear the whole rotten, filthy city of Kul Minen apart. I'm going to find out if I have to ram the seven inch barrel of my Evans pistol down your throat. You're under arrest, L'fao. I'm taking you to the Tower of Haffal for interrogation!"

AN UTTER silence filled the place. There was a discreet, hurried scurrying away of Martians from the tables and out of the huge door. Only L'fao and Walton remained in the place. The girls had fled, all of them. Now there was only ominous silence, no more clashing music, just stillness and the eerie flickering of the Kindor lights. And a cruel, inhuman intent glowering in L'fao's eyes.

Then the Q'nefi showed. They came drifting quietly out of the shadows, their green bodies in green robes barely visible at first, then as they emerged from the darkness the Kindor lights began to glitter and flash on the long swords in their hands. There was a score of them, Walton counted, coming quietly at him from three directions. They were between him and the door, between him and those shadowy entrances to other parts of the building. All he had at his back was cold black stone.

Walton said, "In my hand under this table I am holding my Evans pistol, L'fao. My finger is on the trigger. I have only to press the trigger once and you will have a neat little hole one inch in diameter burned right through your belly.

Call your green playmates off, L'fao."

The Martian stirred not a finger. He did not speak. His black eyes mocked Walton. The Q'nefi came soundlessly on. Suddenly—

"G'nah! G'nah!"

From twenty throats the savage, bestial cry burst simultaneously. The walls seemed to tremble beneath the lustful, primal fury in the shouts.

"G'nah! G'nah!"

The Kindor lights glittered off up-raised, brandished blades and the Q'nefi rushed. They hurdled tables in their feral charge, they sent stools crashing.

"G'nah! G'nah!"

Sweat beaded Walton's brow. Lips thinned in a white, stiff line, he pressed the trigger of the Evans pistol. L'fao emitted a horrible scream. He lurched to his feet, arms flailing, mouth wide and shrieking, the whites of his eyes showing. He threw himself to the floor, clawing hands scratching at his belly, kicking and screaming for someone to kill him.

Walton had leaped to his feet. He pressed his back against cold stone. Dully he realized that the Q'nefi were too many for him even though they were armed only with swords. From the speed of their charge, he figured he could, at best, get half of them, so he started at the left of the rushing semi-circle hemming him in.

He worked down the line of lunging Q'nefi methodically, like he was knocking a row of tin cans off fence posts. The Evans pistol hissed steadily. Krohnite fumes rose, almost gagging him. The screams of dying Q'nefi rose in volume as if by sheer sound they could lift the ceiling off the immense room.

Sickeningly, Walton realized he could get only two more of them and then they would be on him. The lights flickering off wildly waving blades blinded him. He could feel the heat from the rapidly working Evans pistol. One Q'nefi loomed over him, highheld sword swiftly slicing down. Grimly, Walton knew he could get this one but he would be the last.

THE EVANS hissed. The agony of it twisted the Q'nefi halfway around, the sword dropping from his fingers while a strangled howl of pain ripped out of his straining throat. Walton spun, pistol seeking more Q'nefi, but they were on the run. Already they were melting into the far shadows. Walton watched unbelieving.

It was the loud hissing of several Evans pistols and rifles that brought awareness to him and he remembered the Guard patrol he had so carefully instructed. They had arrived just in time. He watched them racing across the room in pursuit of the Q'nefi.

Two of the green men were still kicking and crying in front of Walton. Their wounds were hopeless so he took careful aim twice with the Evans and swiftly ended their screaming.

A young lieutenant came running up to Walton, face anxious. Walton could feel his knees begin to weaken. He tried to grin but it didn't quite come off.

"Some picnic, eh, lieutenant?" he said...

The patrol rounded up seven Q'nefi and three alabaster-skinned Martians and they were taken to the Tower of Haffal. There they were stripped to make sure they had concealed no weapons or poisons. It was then that Walton noticed one of the alabaster Martians had a small blue tattoo on his breast.

After they had replaced their clothing, Walton said to the Martian with the tattoo, "How are you called?"

"Arfot, g'nula," the man said humbly. He was stocky for a Martian. He had a wide, round face and frightened, evasive black eyes.

"Forget that 'g'nula' stuff," Walton said coldly. "That's not going to get you anything. This is strictly business." He stared speculatively at Arfot. "You are of the Cult of Califoa? You believe in the Teachings?"

"Yes, g'nula."

"Califoa and Aklat. You sure believe in spreading your bets around, don't you, Arfot? You sure aren't

taking chances of missing out on anything, are you? Tell me, how well do you believe in the Teachings?"

"I believe most implicitly. Others may ridicule but I believe. Nothing shall shake my belief."

Walton showed a small, hard smile. "Good. In a short while you'll be able to show us how well you believe."

Walton turned to a lieutenant. "I want you to get me some black paint or tar and some dried gafir dung, lieutenant."

The officer stared dumbly at Walton. "Didn't you hear me?" Walton shouted. "And don't stop to pick flowers along the way either!"

Confused, the lieutenant started to salute Walton, then halted halfway through the gesture. The lieutenant wheeled and went swiftly out of the room. Walton ordered that Arfot be bound hand and foot.

Walton told another officer, "Get Bassett. Tell him to come here immediately. Tell him if he isn't here on the double he won't even be a second lieutenant by the time I get through with him!"

THE ANGER was burning ugly in Walton. He had some premonition of what lay ahead and while he didn't exactly know what it was he did feel that it wasn't much good for him. This impression made him mean and irritable. He began striding around the large interrogation room.

Colonel Bassett arrived, face purple with anger and indignation. Before he could speak, Walton said sharply, "I just want you to watch and listen, Colonel." He ignored Bassett after that.

The lieutenant, still looking baffled, soon returned with a small jar of black paint and the dung. Arfot, bound, had been laid on a table. Walton stood over the Martian.

"Arfot, you know without my asking you what I wish you to tell me but, for the record, I will say that I want to know the names of all those in your group practicing Aklat. I do not expect you to tell

me this willingly so I am going to take measures."

He seated himself on the edge of the table and leaned over Arfot. "So you believe in the Teachings?" Walton said softly. "How well, Arfot? Do you really believe in the After-life? Do you believe in the world of torment, in the world of cold, howling winds and biting, swirling sand and maddening thirst? If you do believe in that, Arfot, do you also believe in the Three Forbidden Words?"

Walton noted the sudden distending of Arfot's eyes but the Martian's mouth tightened. He stared on up past Walton to the high ceiling. Arfot said nothing.

"Correct me if I detail the ritual of the Three Forbidden Words wrong, Arfot," Walton went on. "First, the mystic symbol of Califo is blackened from sight. Second, it is sprinkled with dried gafir dung. Third, the Three Forbidden Words are then carved on your chest with the point of a sharp knife and you are irrevocably doomed to the world of torment during all of your After-life. Is that correct, Arfot?"

Sweat burst out on Arfot's face, channeled crookedly down his cheeks, but he said nothing.

"Well, I can try," Walton said easily. "If I do it wrong, you've got nothing to worry about, Arfot. If I do it right, it's your tough luck."

He ripped Arfot's robe open, baring the man's chest and the small, delicate tattoo. Carefully, Walton smeared black paint on the tattoo until it was obliterated. Then Walton covered the blackness with dried dung. Now Walton drew his knife from his belt and waved the blade an instant above Arfot's eyes.

"Your last chance, Arfot," Walton said softly. "No?"

Face set hard, Walton bent over Arfot. The sharp point of the knife pricked flesh, a drop of blood squeezed out from the tiny cut. Suddenly Arfot began to twist and squirm, shouting hoarsely.

"No! No! I implore you in the name of Califo. No, g'nula, no, no!"

Walton still held the point of the knife against Arfot's flesh. "You'll

tell me what I wish to know?"

"Yes, g'nula, yes..."

After the Martians had been led from the room to the dungeons below, Colonel Bassett made a complete turn of the room, hands clasped behind his back, his face white with rage. His voice trembled as he began to shout.

"I'll hang them. Men and women, all of them, I'll hang them from a gibbet on top of the Tower for all of Kul Minen to see. They'll hang there until their skeletons remain, they'll hang there as a lesson to every Martian in the city who is ever tempted to try Aklat.

"And don't you try to stop me, Walton. I know the extent of my authority. Your job consists only of the arrest, mine alone is the job of judgment and execution as governor-general of the city of Kul Minen. I promise you, Walton, that after I am through there will be no more Aklat practiced in Kul Minen or any other part of Mars.

"Now bring them in, all of them. If they resist, shoot them down on the spot!..."

CHAPTER V

WALTON tried being objective about it. He eliminated from his consideration what his heart told him, he occupied his mind only with the cold facts. Mars was an alien planet. Martians had a different sense of values and morals from Earthmen. They were all similar human beings but Martians at heart were cruel and callous and unfeeling, even though at one time they might have enjoyed a high degree of civilization. Every Martian was alike, Walton tried telling himself but he found it hard to reconcile himself to the thought.

As the Guard fanned out through the city, apprehending those Martians named by Arfot, Walton went to Ayanna's dwelling. She lived in an immense structure at the edge of the city. She had told Walton that she had no father and mother, that this house had been empty like so many others in Kul Minen so she had appropriated it.

She welcomed Walton with an eager smile on her face but her gladness quickly vanished when she saw the stern look on his features.

"Arfot talked," Walton said bluntly. "He named names. He named you, Ayanna."

He saw her stiffen. Something which he could not quite define came out in her face. It wasn't fear or regret, it was more like a haughty defiance.

"What are you going to do, Walton?" she asked quietly.

"I am supposed to arrest you and take you to the Tower of Haffal. There you will be tried and if you are found guilty of practicing Aklat you will be hanged."

Now a flicker of fear crossed her face. She could not conceal that, Walton thought. But her eyes remained cold and speculative as she stared at him.

"Why did you come to arrest me, Walton? Why didn't you let someone else do that?"

Deep in his heart Walton knew the answer but he did not speak it. There had been in him a small hope that things would miraculously turn for the better but he realized now that he had been deluding himself. He had to accept the truth, the ugly, heart-wrenching truth.

Ayanna moved in close to him so that he could have closed his arms about her but Walton held his hands stiffly at his side. Ayanna's face lifted, her parted mouth was there close to his. "Is it because you love me, Walton? Is it because you do not mean me to die? Is that why you came instead of the others?"

The urge to grasp her and pull her tight against him, to press his mouth down on hers was almost overpowering in Walton. He began remembering little things, little ugly, vicious things—how she had come to him after it had become known who he was and why he had come to Mars, how she had always wanted him to leave his job and take her to Earth, always her insistence that he hurry, hurry.

When he did not speak, fear crossed Ayanna's face again, open,

stark fear. Her fingers clawed at his sleeves. "You are not going to take me to the tower, are you, Walton? You are not going to let me die? I can live now, far beyond forty-six rees. You will not let me hang? Please, Walton? Please say you will not let me hang?"

HE KNEW it was time for a decision. He had put it off long enough, he had weighed the whole matter and he felt there was only one thing he could do.

His lips moved stiffly. "I will not let you hang, Ayanna."

A glad cry broke from her. She kissed him fiercely but he did not respond. She was so happy she did not seem to notice this. There was a hint of triumph about her.

"I know where I can borrow a gafir," she was saying. "I can steal across the Scarlet Desert to Har Binen. They will never catch me." Her glance lifted suspiciously to Walton. "You are letting me go, aren't you?"

"I said I wouldn't let you hang. But tell me, have you practiced Aklat?"

"I have eaten Aklat several times. I shall live far beyond forty-six rees."

She began gathering things to take with her. She was happy, eager to be away. Walton felt his throat constrict. For a moment he felt that he was doing the wrong thing. Then he remembered that she was a Martian, she was different in her heart and soul from him. She was savage and cruel inside because that was inherent in all Martians. It was not right to allow her to escape for that might encourage other Martians to try Aklat. But he could not let her hang. He could not stand the thought of her body swinging in the cold Kassir Wind until the flesh rotted away and only the bones remained. This thing he was doing was the only way, he thought sadly.

She had her pack ready and he followed her to the door. Outside she turned and smiled and lifted a hand in farewell.

"Goodby, Walton," she said and started away.

"Goodby, Ayanna," he whispered. Beneath the gafir robe, the Evans pistol lay in Walton's sweating hand. He could feel sweat dripping down over his lips, running off his chin, sweat in the face of the frigid Kassir Wind. He opened his robe and aimed the Evans. It hissed gently once. Ayanna made no outcry. She would not hang...

All the way back to the Tower of Haffal, Walton kept framing the message he would have space-radioed to headquarters on Earth. Something like—I, Emmett Walton, do hereby tender my resignation as an inspector for Interplanetary Intelligence effective as of today April 24, 2091... That should do the trick, he thought.

His steps echoed hollowly as he walked down the immense corridors toward the radio room. The bitterness, the disillusion, the sadness kept rising in great, gulping waves to his brain. This was no job for a man, he kept telling himself. It was time he got out of it and settled down on Earth and raised wheat or something.

In the room he picked up a pad and pencil and thought a moment more about what he was going to radio. Then, almost automatically, he wrote: —MISSION ACCOMPLISHED. FORWARD NEXT ASSIGNMENT...

THE END

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(Continued From Page 45)

long way to go."

Maria turned abruptly with a broken laugh and walked fast to the exit panel. As the panel opened, she turned slowly around. Ballard started, his face sinking to a gray paleness. Benson half rose from his chair and slowly licked his lips.

She was crying. Her voice trembled with sobs, as she said.

"He made the right answer. A difference that makes no difference is no difference. W fooled him. I stood up there beside a twin made in a giant test tube, a thing exactly like myself that has since been destroyed, returned to the chemicals that made it. I killed Marc! I did it! I agreed to make him choose...doomed him to a hell of indecision and doubt!

"So he came to me, and we lived for a week together. A beautiful warm and human week. We were in love." She laughed hysterically. "And then the test, and six months more. But he knew. He *knew*! He knew there was something wrong. A difference!"

Benson reached out a thick hand. "Maria—"

"He knew," she screamed. "I changed that afternoon when he took that test. When I stood there smiling down at him while his magnificent mind started to break open like an egg—I *did* begin to change right then. And he knew it! He knew it afterward....that I was different."

She started to laugh, then stopped quickly. Ugly lines crawled down to the corners of her mouth. "But he knew the real answer. On that day, gentlemen, I lost my soul, and he knew it! Maybe it's something science will never be able to see, gentlemen—but Marc knew the difference."

She went out. Benson pressed a button on his desk and the labmen were waiting for her in the hall with hypos and sedatives.

Benson crossed his heavy arms on the desk carefully, and as carefully placed his forehead on them to rest. "Mark up another failure," he whispered. "We're not gods yet, Ballard, not by a damn sight." His voice sounded far away, muffled, "Not for such a long, long time."

They were terrible beasts, and she
would be helpless before them.



TRANS - PLUTONIAN

A Science-Fiction Classic

by MILTON
LESSER

CONKLIN'S discovery of the tenth planet could have made him a great scientist. But he wasn't thinking of that. He had blasted out beyond the edge of the flat spatial disc which is the solar system, only because there was no place else to go. Pluto, actually, was

more than eight billion miles away, on the other side of the sun, and the police had followed Conklin's battered *Triton* out beyond Neptune's orbit.

There was no place else to go. Up and down—north and south of the solar equator—were meaningless con-

A new planet, a new Earth-girl, and nothing to disturb Conklin's spatial paradise — so long, that is, as its hideous inhabitants stayed petrified!

cepts applied to great sweeps of empty space, and the notices for Conklin's capture were posted on every world from Mercury to the Neptunian satellite.

If Conklin did not go outward Conklin could go nowhere, and so he simply continued on the plane of the ecliptic, beyond the Plutonian orbit. He had enough canned air, water, and food for months—for years if necessary, and he could blast out beyond Pluto and get lost for a while. The furor would not last forever, and when it died down, Conklin could come back into the system.

But his stowaway posed a problem. Robbery of the Ganymede earth freighter was one thing, and murder was quite another. After a time, when he ventured back into the system, there always was the possibility that he would be caught. He hardly considered it seriously, until now—but he had to, here beyond Neptune. He had to ever since he had refueled on Ariel, and blasted off again and found the girl arrear-ships.

At other times, Conklin could have admired her. She was an earth-girl on Ariel and she was beautiful. Conklin did not know why she was running away, and he had no time to find out. Four days ago he had accelerated beyond Neptune, and he'd hardly had time to sleep since then. The girl could wait....

The *Triton* screamed straight for the tenth planet, and it was the cube of a million-to-one shot. One moment space was empty in front of the ship, frighteningly empty, with the infinite parsecs beckoning Conklin. The next, a haze globe swam into view in the foreport, then slipped away beyond the left edge of the plastiglass.

"Hey!" Conklin blurted. "Did you see that? Kid, did you see that?"

The girl nodded. "It was a planet. It couldn't have been anything but a planet..."

Conklin gritted his teeth. "I know it. This could change everything. Run? The devil, what do I have to run for? We can hole up on this globe for as long as we want. If

it's cold, there'll be solid oxygen, and we can melt it—no sir, we don't have to run."

And then Conklin was busy with the controls, swinging the *Triton* in a tight arc which threw the girl back, whimpering, against the bulkheads. Conklin could feel the five-grav battering ram against his chest and constricting his guts, but he smiled grimly. What did a little pain now matter? Soon he would be safe—he could hide away as long as he wanted, on a planet which the solar system did not know existed. For a moment he pictured the dismay with which the police would view his disappearance, and then he chuckled, despite the pain. In a while, they would think he had met with an accident someplace in space. It was true that Conklin couldn't land on any known world: there the vigil was unending—but out in space anything could happen, and they would think Conklin were dead.

His eyes were slits against the pain when he saw the planet swim slowly back into view. It hovered there in the port, and gradually Conklin lined it up on the cross-hairs. Then it grew larger, and soon it covered the entire port. Conklin blasted the fore-tubes once and then again, and the pressure slapped him back hard in his chair.

Slowly, he brought the ship in. They landed with hardly a bump, and Conklin reached into a cabinet, took out a bottle of liquor, and poured himself a big drink. His hands were trembling. If those grays had piled up a little more, he knew he would have blacked out, and the ship would have plowed a burning furrow half way across the planet. He was lucky.

THE GIRL wasn't so lucky. She lay stretched out behind Conklin, unconscious. He bent and examined her swiftly. Satisfied, he stood up. She was merely unconscious. She'd be up and around in an hour or two, but Conklin was in no hurry. He had all the time in the world. Time was his friend—and here on the tenth planet, nothing could go wrong. He

watched the easy rise and fall of the girl's breasts beneath the tight metallic blouse, and he grunted. Time was definitely on his side, and he was in no hurry to get back to the system.

He leaned back and stretched, and then he lit a cigarette. Slowly, he walked to the instrument panel and examined the dials. He whistled.

This tenth planet was weird. There was plenty of oxygen outside, and inert gasses. The temperature was thirty degrees Centigrade, and the gravity registered at point-seven-five earth norm. Conklin smiled.

Everything was perfect. Conklin did not know how this could be, six billion miles from the sun—but the planet could have been a second earth, a little smaller, but with earth-norm temperature and an atmosphere that almost matched earth's atom for atom. Conklin did not know what caused the warmth—very probably the planet was a young one and youth-fires still burned within its crust. He did not care, and he would not worry his head about it.

But of one thing he was glad. They would have no need to stay inside the battered *Triton*. They could live outside, on the surface of the planet itself, and it would be pleasant waiting until the solar system forgot all about him. He looked at the girl again, there on the floor, and he drew his breath in sharply. With a setup like this, and with that girl—he almost wouldn't mind staying here forever.

Conklin buckled the blaster to his belt and stepped to the airlock. The lock-mechanism would respond to his touch from either side, and thus the girl could not lock him out. It was true that she could open the lock from the inside, but she probably would be too afraid to do anything about it when she regained consciousness. And meanwhile, Conklin wanted to see what their new home was like.

When he opened the outer door the first thing he thought of was a museum. A natural history museum with stuffed animals and models of plants, with everything perfectly

realistic, except for one thing. There was no motion, no life.

Conklin was gazing on a world of statues.

He reached for his blaster and gripped it tightly in his hand. The place was a dead place and he could have no fear of creatures which did not move, but they were hideous creatures. He had read someplace of a petrified forest—he knew that a great section of the Martian desert had become petrified overnight before history's dawn, knew that the creatures of that long-dead Martian world were perfectly preserved for the world to see.

This tenth planet was like that. They were in a forest of great fern-like plants, but nothing stirred. And Conklin could see the denizens of that forest, weird unearthly beasts, beasts out of some impossible nightmare. Huge creatures not unlike the dinosaurs of earth's dawn—perhaps more like the dragons of primitive mythology.

But then Conklin returned the blaster to his belt. They were dead. He did not know why they stood about in the eternal forest in a wild tableau of unmoving action, but they were dead. Petrified. And he need not fear them.

Off to the left, a great-jawed monster stood above a serpentine thing, the massive head poised a yard above a coil of the serpent, two great fore-legs holding the serpent down. The great jaw was open, and it seemed ready to close about the serpent, to tear the serpentine body in half. But the jaws were motionless and the serpent did not move. It could have been a picture.

FASCINATED, Conklin came closer. There was a syrupy blue wetness on the serpent's coils. It was blood, but, of course, it could not be wet—it merely looked wet. Conklin reached out with his hand and touched it. He recoiled quickly and stared in horror at his fingers.

They were sticky.

He wanted to run back to the spaceship. He did not know why, but he wanted to run back. The blueish

goo clung to his fingers and it was blood, and he knew that could not be. This was a strange world, a fantastic world of statues, but it could not hurt him. He had nothing to fear. The wetness could be explained. He did not know how, but there had to be an explanation somewhere. He must not get panicky.

He looked again, and what he saw was impossible. A big drop of saliva was poised on the lower jaw of the monster, gleaming in the strange light which must have come from subterranean sources. The head was bent low over the coils of the serpent, and, afraid now but too grimly fascinated to resist, Conklin reached up and touched the drop. He touched it—and it rolled off the jaw to the ground!

His hand had touched the creature's jaw—and the flesh was soft and warm. The creature was alive!

It stood there, unmoving, poised for the death blow, but it was alive!

Conklin ran. Ahead of him now was the *Triton*, and Conklin had to reach it. He had to—

His foot caught on a vine and he stumbled. He went down and he rolled over, dazed. He sat up, gingerly rubbing a spot on his head, facing around again toward the tableau of the two monsters fighting. He heard the sound then. It was a scream, a wild, horrible scream, and it took a while before he realized it came from his own throat.

The teeth of the dragon were buried in the coils of the serpent—still unmoving, it seemed to Conklin, but they were buried there.

A slight wind fanned the sweat on his cheek. There had been no wind before.

The jaws of the monster began to open—slowly, so slowly that at first Conklin could not see it. It was like a moving picture cut down to an impossibly slow speed, without the individual pictures becoming apparent. Conklin sat rooted to the spot, watching.

A coil of the serpentine body lifted, so ponderously that Conklin had to stare hard to see any motion at all. But it was moving, and now the

dragon's jaw hung open, and Conklin could see the sluggish flow of blood from a new wound in the serpent's coils—a wound which had not been there before, a fresh wound, with a slow rivulet of blood, like lava moving up a hillside.

Conklin tore his eyes away and stood up. Everything was moving faster now—still impossibly slow, but fast enough for him to see the motions for what they were. The dragon-jaw began to close again—

A pair of horrible eyes stared up at Conklin from the matted vines at his feet, and a sloth-like creature extended two hairy arms with a slowness that would have made the earthly tortoise appear fleet.

He ran. Twice he tripped again but he got up and ran. All about him the tempo began to speed up—and he turned once when he reached the *Triton's* lock and saw the dying serpent writhing on the ground. It writhed furiously and the monster-jaws closed on it again and again until it lay still. Then the dragon-creature began to eat, and Conklin's hands trembled so much that he hardly could manipulate the lock.

Something was slithering toward him through the undergrowth, and he screamed. His breath came in burning gasps and he wanted to scream again, but no sound came. Then the door sprang in and he plunged into the airlock, panting. For a moment he stood against the inner door, too weak to open it. And then he lifted his hands and worked on the lock...

HE SAT DOWN in the control cabin, aware that he could see the girl nowhere. He had looked through the ship hurriedly, but he could not find her. Now he sat there, panting, and he reached for the liquor, but his hands were trembling too much and he let them fall in his lap. He was so tired—

When he awoke, the girl sat cross-legged on the floor in front of him.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello? Where the devil did you

come from. You weren't in the ship when I returned."

"Of course I was. I was right here. I saw you come in."

"Then why didn't I see you? Huh, tell me that?"

The girl frowned. "I think I know, but look, Mr. Conklin—"

"Eh? You know my name?"

"Of course I know your name. The reward posters are up on Ariel, like anyplace else. You're running away from the law, Mr. Conklin..."

He gaped at her in mock horror. "Isats? So I'm running, but you can talk. Sure, you can talk. Sister, you're running away from something too, or you wouldn't have stowed away on the *Triton*."

Then, abruptly, Conklin remembered the outside. He ran to the fore-port and looked out. There was the statue world again—everything poised for action, but nothing moving. Everything motionless, as he had first seen it. He ran to the side-port and looked out. The dragon-creature had half a serpent protruding from its mouth, but it was not moving.

"I'm going nuts," Conklin said. "Nuts..."

The girl shrugged, but Conklin thought he saw her grinning a little. "No one asked you to run away, Mr. Conklin—and now that you have, no one is responsible for what happens to you."

Conklin brightened. "Okay, you just remember that. You ran away, too, and no one is responsible."

"That was different. I didn't run from the law. I simply left Ariel to elope with my fiancé on Mars. Dad didn't approve, but we wanted to get married. I thought your ship was heading Marsward—obviously a mistake. Now I'm here with you—"

"Yeah," said Conklin. "Yeah." They could stay in the ship and he could forget all about that weird nightmare outside. He reached out and grabbed the girl's arm, lifting her up off the floor and pulling her toward him.

She struck out with her opened palm and hit him hard across the cheek, and he let go of her hand. "Just don't you do that again, Mr. Conklin—"

"No—?" And then Conklin tensed. In her other hand the girl held his blaster, and it pointed, unwavering, at his chest.

"No," she said.

Conklin leaned back and smiled. He had time. Plenty of time. If the girl wanted to play hard to get, what was the difference? "Okay," he said. "I'm sorry. Very very sorry. We're all alone out here, a couple of billion miles from the nearest human, but I shouldn't have touched you."

"Don't be funny."

"Hell, I ain't being funny. But I don't like a gun staring at me like that. Want to put it down like a good girl?"

She smiled. "Okay, but just don't try anything." Then she placed the gun on an open shelf of the cabinet, near the bottle of liquor.

He'd let her take the lead from now on. He'd be nice and friendly, but for a while, at least, she'd do the leading. He thought it would be better that way.

"You know," he said, "we've discovered a planet. You and me, kid, we discovered a planet. That's pretty good."

"Sure. Only it was an accident. One chance in a trillion." Then she spoke, half to herself, "As early as the twentieth century, they thought there might be a tenth planet. Certain aberrations in the orbit of Pluto just didn't make sense, and Neptune couldn't account for it. The tenth planet..."

CONKLIN found here an opening wedge for conversation. Every time he thought of what lay outside, he trembled, but he pushed it from his mind, and now, safely within the ship, the girl was more important. "Hey, how'd you know about all that?"

"Oh. That's easy. Dad is chief astronomer on the Ariel observatory staff, and he talks all the time about his work."

"You know what he talks about?"

The girl nodded. "I guess I'm something of a scientist myself. It must run in the family."

"Yeah," Conklin muttered. "Then

maybe you can explain what in blazes is going on outside. Can you, eh?"

"Well, yes and no. Maybe I can. Maybe not. I think I know..."

"Honey, if you can tell me what is going on out there, I'll love you for life."

She laughed, and Conklin liked the sound. He wanted to reach out and take her in his arms, but he would wait. Let her get lonely first.

"I'd hardly like that," she said. "But if you promise not to do it, I'll try to tell you."

Conklin chuckled and raised three fingers in an age-old salute. "On my boy scout honor," he said.

"Well, then, Conklin, how long do you think you were out there, outside the ship?"

She had dropped the Mr. She was getting friendly. "Oh, about ten minutes, maybe twenty."

"You were outside for a week."

"Ha, ha, ha. Very funny."

"I'm not trying to be funny. You were outside for a week. You can check the food cabinet if you want. You'd know I wouldn't want to throw any food away."

"Well, what do you know—" She wasn't lying, Conklin could see that. But he did not understand.

"I saw you out there, after I awoke. First you walked around normal, among all those statues, but then you began to slow down. You became sluggish, incredibly sluggish—and it took me hours, days, to see you move at all. Just like the animals. I couldn't believe my eyes, Conklin, but I saw it. You were almost a statue, and you came back to the ship like the hour-hand of a clock. That slow. Slower."

"Well, I don't get it. What's going on?"

"Don't you see, Conklin, don't you see? Hmm, no, you wouldn't. If my Dad were here—what a field day..."

"Maybe I ain't so dumb," said Conklin. "Maybe you could tell me." He was serious now—he knew he had come close to being killed out there, and he wanted to know why.

HE GOT UP and walked to the port, looking at the world of

statues. Nothing moved. Nothing moved in a way which he could see.

"Tell me—"

"It's a foreign world, Conklin; not native to the solar system. I don't know where it comes from, but that isn't important. It was free in space and the sun caught it and gave it an orbit out here. It's a totally foreign, alien world."

"There's no law that all metabolisms are the same. They are the same, or approximately the same in the solar system, but they don't have to be."

"Met—"

"Metabolism. The rate of bodily function. Growth and decay. Production and destruction. In short, life. Here, on this world, the whole setup is different. Vastly slower. We have no instruments and we can't tell, but there's an incredible difference. Everything is slow, so slow that to our eyes, with our different metabolic rate, this looks like a world of statues. See?"

"Yeah. I think so. So what happened when I went outside?"

"That part is easy. First, you saw everything the way we see it now, from the port. Statues. But then, gradually—in a few minutes—your functioning slowed down. Every part of your functioning slowed down, and you were not aware of the change. You became attuned to this world outside—and everything began to move. They were moving all the time, too slow for you to see—and when you slowed down in every way, your perceptions—everything, you became part of the world. Everything out there was normal to you because you were functioning at a rate thousands of times below your normal one. Now do you see?"

Conklin nodded and said that he did.

"Then, after a week, you got back in through the doors, and—"

"Yeah? Why wasn't I hungry?"

"You wouldn't be. Everything was slower, your whole manner of living. To you, only ten or twenty minutes had passed, not a week."

"Okay. But why didn't I see you?"

"You couldn't. I never stood still

long enough. Your eyes couldn't see that rapidly. Nothing registered. Then you fainted, and you gradually sped up to the normal metabolic rate. Then you got up."

Conklin thought he understood it now. What the girl said made sense and while it was a little hazy around the edges, he thought he could understand it. And now he saw that she was really involved in this science stuff—she liked it and her eyes shone like she had been kissed or something. Or maybe like she wanted to be kissed.

He reached out and touched her hand, and she did not pull it away. She sat there and stared straight ahead, thinking, Conklin bent forward and kissed her.

The opened palm struck him across his cheek again, and the girl stood up. "Cut that out, Conklin. I'm warning you. That's a danger, and I know it—I almost go off into a funk when I think: almost, but not quite. So you just cut it out, Conklin—"

"Listen, kid—"

Suddenly, the girl reached for the blaster. Conklin grabbed her shoulders and shoved her backwards roughly, and she went tumbling against the bulkhead, crumbling to the floor.

She sat up slowly and Conklin had the blaster in his hand. "Now, don't you—be funny!" If this fool kid didn't know there was more to life than a lot of cockeyed science, he would teach her.

He moved forward slowly, the blaster in his hand. The girl stood up and edged along the wall until she stood at the lock. Then she played with it for a moment and the door swung open.

"Stop!" Conklin cried. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Why, I'm going outside—so you stop bothering me."

"Stop, stop or I'll blast you."

The girl laughed. "Are you kidding? You wouldn't want to do that, Conklin. If you did you'd be all alone, but you want me for company. Don't you, Conklin?"

Of course, the girl was right. It had just been an empty threat. But she couldn't go outside. She'd slow down, like those animals, and then they'd get her. "Stop—" he called, and he ran for the door.

It slammed in his face, and the girl called back:

"Come and get me!"

IT TOOK Conklin less than a minute to make up his mind. He knew he would not have much more time than that—the girl would begin to slow down, and when she did, the animals would get her. As easy as that. They were terrible beasts, impossible creatures, and she would be helpless before them.

Conklin remembered what he had seen last time, and what had almost happened, and he did not want to go outside. Not again. On the other hand, he wanted the girl. That was more important—and, anyway, if he ran right outside and got her, then returned quickly, nothing would happen. It would be perfectly safe.

He ran into the airlock and paused. One of the spacesuits was missing from its rack. Fool girl—scientific as hell, but she didn't even realize that she would not need a spacesuit out there. That was a woman for you. He shrugged and stepped outside.

It was the same as last time—a world of statues. Now Conklin was afraid, because he knew that unless he got back to the *Triton* soon, the statues would start to move, and he did not want that.

He walked now among the creatures which did not move—and although his eyes did not support this, he knew they were alive, and moving, living their primitive existence at a rate too slow for him to perceive. It was maddening, but he accepted it as fact. The beasts of this jungle were alive—alive now, and they would be deadly when his own metabolic rate slowed down sufficiently for them to cope with him. He must get the girl and retreat to the ship before that had a chance to happen.

Off in the distance he could see

the girl, her spacesuited figure big and bulky. He called out to her, and the fishbowl head of the spacesuit swung around halfway, and even at this distance, he could see her smiling.

He ran, and a hundred yards away, she began to run, too.

Because he was not encumbered with a spacesuit, he could move faster, and presently the distance between them was halved—but that was all, after that he could not gain. The girl stopped running, but he could not gain an inch. She stood and she watched him, bulky gloved hands on bulky hips, smiling. Then she took a step back toward him—and she shimmered!

She shimmered and faded, became a phantom—less than a phantom. Now he saw only the barest shadow, right next to him, moving slowly in a circle. He heard what might have been laughter, but he could not tell. It was just one short, musical sound—the girl laughing, at her normal rate. He was slowing. His rate was decreasing...

Around him, sluggish^{ly}, the life of the jungle began to... It all seemed so unreal—this possibly slow movement. And then it began to quicken. Something reached down toward him from above—a great column of flesh, with two hideously unhinged jaws and a gaping maw of a mouth...

He screamed and he tried to run. It felt as if he were running with his usual speed, but this time he knew he wasn't. He was moving slowly—still faster than the beast, but slowly—and he was getting slower all the time.

He screamed again, and then he cried: "Save me. Please, please—"

He was down on the ground. He didn't know how. He could not see anything, but something had bowled him over and he was on the ground and it felt as if he were being dragged, but he could not tell. The ground became blurry, hazy. Everything faded behind a mist, and he heard the whimpering voice again, his own!

"Get me out of here! Please! Back to the ship—"

HE SAT in the control cabin and the girl started the rockets. He heard the engine booming and felt the ship accelerate, and the pressure would have stopped him from moving, but he could not move anyway. His hands and his feet were tied firmly to the chair.

"How did you do it?" he said. "How?"

Soon the acceleration slackened, and he saw the girl get up and stretch leisurely, the metallic blouse and skirt tight against her breasts and thighs. Now he had lost more than the girl—he had lost his freedom.

"It was the spacesuit," she said. "I wore the spacesuit, with canned air from the ship, and my metabolism was untouched. But you—slowed. Again, like last time, you looked just like a statue. I threw you over and dragged you back to the ship. Then I tied you up before your metabolic rate came back to normal.

"Then, out there, you saved my life..."

"Sure, sure I did. I didn't want you to die out here, where no one would know it. The police want you—"

"Not the police," Conklin pleaded. "You wouldn't take me to the police." He squirmed around and watched the tenth planet disappearing beyond the range of the rear port.

The girl smiled. "Well, not yet. They're looking for you all over the system, and I guess it doesn't matter where I take you. First thing I'm going to do is land this ship on Mars and find my fiance. There's a marriage which is kind of overdue..."

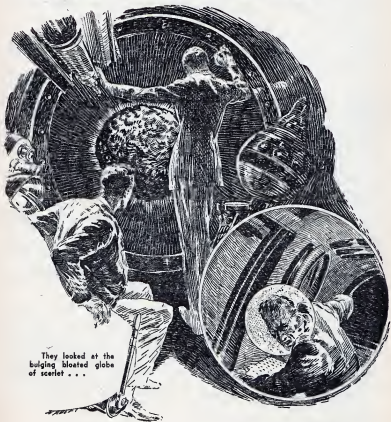
Conklin was hopeful. Then she wouldn't take him to the police—

"And then," she said, "there will be plenty of time to hand you over to the authorities on Mars. First you can watch the wedding if you'd like."

Conklin knew he wouldn't like it.

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN SOME SORT OF TIDAL MOVEMENT, OR A FREAK OF METABOLISM BLOOD-CHILLING FEATURE-LENGTH NOVELET!

THE RED STUFF



They looked at the
bulging bloated globe
of scarlet . . .

by John Beynon

What was it? It was, well, a kind of red stuff. The trouble was, as fast as people wiped it off of things, it crept back. Crept back, too, onto the wiping rag, onto the hand holding the rag, up to the arm

(Note: The Government is of the opinion that in the present critical situation the widest possible publicity should be given to the facts of the case and the events which gave rise to it. It is, therefore, with official approval and encouragement that the proprietors of WALTERS SPACE-NEWS here reprint in pamphlet form the account first published in both the printed and broadcast versions of the issue of that journal dated Friday, 20th July 2051).

HERE IS an official Government emergency warning:

"From now until further notice Clarke Lunar Station will be closed to traffic. No vessel of any kind at present on the Station may put to space, nor will any local craft be permitted to take off from there. All vessels now in space, whether earthward or outward bound, scheduled to call at Clarke must make immediate arrangements to divert to Whitley. Outward bound craft will ground at the normal Whitley Lunar Station base; earthward bound vessels will be directed to the emergency field and must ground there. Any vessel ignoring this instruction will be refused grounding and be dealt with severely. It is emphasized that any vessel grounding at or near Clarke for any reason whatsoever will be refused permission to leave. This warning is effective immediately."

It is likely that only a few of the millions who heard that announcement, or the versions of it in other languages, broadcast on the evening of Monday last, 16th July, took any great notice of it, in spite of its seriousness of tone. After all, though we call this the Space age, only a fractional percentage of us have ever been or ever will be in space.

Readers of this journal cannot fail to have been troubled, more likely alarmed, by the order, but they think of space in a specialized way as something directly affecting their calling or livelihood.

But to the average man, what is the Moon? It is an airless, cheer-

less cinder, the scene of some mining, useful as a testing ground for space conditions, but chiefly notable as a way-station apparently designed by providence for the convenience of space-voyaging humanity. He knows that it is important, but he does not know how important, nor why.

He knows, perhaps, that the Clarke Lunar Station was first opened over fifty years ago, and that it was so named in honour of the octogenarian Doctor of Physics who did so much to further space-travel, but he does not realise what, in terms of mathematics, of power and pay-load, the existence of such a Station and fueling base means. Nor that its absence would entail suspension of space-travel almost entirely for a very long time, until we could completely organize our methods—if we could.

Luckily we are not altogether denied use of the Moon by the closing of Clarke; we can still operate through the Whitley Station—at present. But if that cannot be maintained in use, the question of continued space-travel with ships of the present types becomes grave to the point of hopelessness.

To our regular readers parts of the account which follows will not be new, but it has seemed to the editors desirable that at this critical juncture all the information available should be collated and presented to the public in the form of a narrative giving as honest a picture as possible of the present situation, and its potentialities.

CHAPTER I

AT 20.58 G.M.T. on the 6th January 2051 the radio-operator of the *Madge G.* reported to the Captain that he had picked up a message globe and asked for further instructions.

The *Madge G.* after a cautious route well out of the elliptic to hurdle the asteroid belt had corrected course and was now in fall

towards her destination, Callisto, Moon IV, of Jupiter. Her Captain, John G. Troyte, was not pleased by his operator's report. The passage of the asteroids is always a strain for a conscientious man; even at wide berth there is still the chance of lonely outflyers from the main swarm which will go through a ship as if she were a paper hoop. There is not a lot to be done about it; should the outflyer be anything above the size of a football, it is just too bad; if it is smaller, prompt action can save the ship, providing no vital part is hit. Alertness sustained for the long period is extremely tiring and Captain Troyte felt that he had earned a period of repose and relaxation during the fall towards Callisto.

What was more, he was pretty certain it would not turn out to be a message-globe after all. He had had such a report half-a-dozen times in the course of his career, and it had always turned out to be untrue. In the whole of his time in space he could only recall five being picked up at all. They were a good idea, only they didn't come off: they'd have been all right if there hadn't been quite so much space for them to get lost in, but, practice being so different from theory, it was little wonder that the clause for their compulsory carriage had been struck out of the shipping regulations. They stood, in his opinion, as little chance of being picked up as a two-ounce bottle in mid-Atlantic, probably less. He went along to the radio-cabin himself. The operator was humming in rhythmic harmony with the High-Shakers broadcast from Tedwich, Mars, when he entered.

"Turn off that blamed racket," said Captain Troyte shortly. "Now what's all this about a globe?"

The operator clicked out the High-Shakers, and touched a switch to bring in the pre-set receiver. He listened a moment and then handed over the head-phones. The Captain held one to his ear, and waited: after a few seconds came an unmistakable da da, da da di. He looked at this watch, timing it. Ex-

actly ten seconds later it came again—da da, da da di. He waited until it had repeated once more.

"Good heavens, I really believe it is," he said.

"Can't be anything else, sir," said the operator, smugly.

"Got a line on it?"

THE OPERATOR had. He gave the angles. The Captain considered. The globe was ahead. By rough clock-face placing, at four o'clock, 30 degrees oblique on the last reading, and widening. There was no likelihood of colliding with it.

"Is it coming towards us, or are we chasing it?" he demanded.

"Can't say, sir. At a guess I should say we're more or less chasing it. It's signal strength had improved, but only slowly."

"H'm," said the Captain thoughtfully. "We'll have to get it in. Keep an ear on it. Don't do anything until you're sure the signal strength is past maximum, there'd be a nasty mess if we were to hit it head on. When it's begun to fade get the activator going, and we'll fish it in. But for God's sake do it gently, we don't want the thing hurtling at us like a cannon ball. Better let me know once you've got it started."

The Captain returned to his own cabin more interested than he admitted. The message-globe was an ingenious contrivance which had looked like being more useful than it had proved. The problem had been to provide a ship with some means of communicating its trouble in case of radio failure or wreck. In theory it was to be discharged in the direction of the nearest spacelane where its signal could scarcely fail to be picked up; in actual use very few had been picked up and it had progressively less chance of being found as the area of space operation increased. The general opinion which had led to its omission from the statutory list of equipment was that the majority of the globes sent off continued to tick out their signals undetected until their power gave out whereupon they floated about in space as additional hazards. There was a feeling that the

hazards of space were quite numerous enough without them.

The radio operator hung his phones on a hook where he could hear the intermittent signal from the globe conveniently, pondered whether he should try to listen to the High-Shakers at the same time, decided against it, and hunted for the sealed box in which the activator had lain ever since the *Madge G.* was launched. After study of the instructions which he had not seen since the day when he'd mugged them up for his final examination, he got it set up. Then there was nothing to do but wait.

Two and a half hours later the meter showed the signal strength of the globe to be falling off slightly. He lit a cigarette, took another look at the operating instructions, and grunted. Then he pressed a key on the activator, and waited.

NEARLY A thousand miles away in space the $2\frac{1}{2}$ foot diameter steel globe revolved slowly as it drifted in a leisurely way upon the orbit into which it had fallen. To all appearance it was as inert as any other fragment of flotsam in the void. Then gradually, almost imperceptibly at first, its revolution began to slow. In a few minutes it was revolving clumsily like a ball with its weight out of true. Another five minutes and it failed to complete a revolution, it paused as though just short of top dead centre, swung back, oscillated gently awhile and then came to rest.

Back on the *Madge G.*, the radio operator called up the navigator who did some quick figuring. Out in space the globe swung a little in response to the calculations. The radio-operator pressed another key. An observer, had there been one close to the globe, would have seen little jets of flame spurt from that side of it distant from the *Madge G.* as the relays went in. Simultaneously he would have watched it break from its orbit and scud away on a course calculated to intersect with that of the ship far out of sight.

The radio-operator informed the

Captain that the globe was on its way. The Captain joined him, and together they bent over the signal-meter.

"What did you give?" asked Captain Troyte.

"Five seconds on low power, sir," the operator told him.

The strength of reception according to the needle was almost constant.

"H'm. Our own speed, near as damn it," said the Captain after a few minutes. "Better give it the same again."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The operator pressed his key once more. Far away in the shining steel ball the relays clicked as before. Fuel was injected into the miniature combustion chambers and ignited. Little daggers of flame stabbed out into the darkness behind the globe, and it thrust forward on its way at twice its former speed.

"That'll do," the Captain said. "You've no idea of its distance yet?"

"Impossible to tell, sir. If the batteries are strong it may be a long way off. If they're down at all it may be only a hundred miles or so away. No way of knowing, sir."

"All right. Tell your relief to keep a check on it, and I'll have the navigator set a watch for it. If it is a long way off it may be a number of hours before we spot it?"

"Yes, sir."

The *Madge G.* continued uninterrupted in her fall towards Jupiter. The operator after further consultation with the navigator corrected the globe's course slightly in compensation for the increased speed. Again there was nothing to do but wait while somewhere outside in the blackness of space the little globe tore through the emptiness on a course designed to bring it to a rendezvous with the ship at a point far ahead.

"Better read up on this," said the operator, throwing the instruction book to his relieving operator. "You may have to fish it in."

The relief looked at the book.

"Oh God. Just my bloody luck. Might have known it when I skipped the lecture on the things," he said, gloomily.

FIVE HOURS later his telephone rang.

"Think we've spotted it, Bill," said the voice of the assistant-navigator. "Hold on. Let you know in a minute or two."

He came through again in under the two minutes.

"No doubt about it now. Couldn't be sure before because the way it lies you can only see a crescent of it. It's coming in a few points from dead astern, making a fairly acute angle with our own course. Keep your box of tricks handy, and hold on here."

The radio operator arranged the remote control set in front of him and waited, telephone in hand.

"Coming up," said the assistant navigator's voice. "Coming along nicely." He paused. "Overhauling us fast. About three miles or so off. I reckon. Doesn't seem to be converging much... Hang it, it isn't converging at all: it's diverging. Must have pretty well crossed our course behind us. Better bring it over a bit, Bill. Give it a touch on the port tubes. Just a touch, gently as you can... God, man, call that a touch? It leapt like a frightened kangaroo. Stand by to correct with starboard tubes. She's coming...coming... Blast, she's out of the field of this instrument—half-a-minute... Yes, there she is swinging right across, and ahead of us now. Correct when I tell you...ready...ready...now!"

Through the instrument he caught the little flutter of fire to the right of the sphere as the radio-operator obeyed.

"Okay," he said, "direction good. Travelling dead ahead of us. Only diverging alightly, but she's running away. Get ready to brake her. Better try three seconds on low power.... No, she's still pulling ahead... Give another two seconds... No, damn it, that's too much: we'll overrun her. One second low power acceleration....

That's better: that's much better. Now the least possible touch on her starboard tubes, again. And gently this time...."

The jockeying went on for quite a while. Gradually by correction, re-correction, and correction again the globe was juggled closer and closer until ship and globe were falling through space together with only a few hundred feet between them. Again the globe was steadied, and once more orientated towards the ship. The operator gave the lightest touch he could on the main tubes, and almost immediately braked her again.

"Great work, Bill," approved the assistant-navigator. "She's still moving, coming in nicely. Stand by for magnets... I'll tell you when... ready...now!"

The operator pressed another key. A moment later there was a clang which rang through the *Madge G.*, as if she had been hit with a sledge hammer.

"Whew," said the radio operator as he wiped his brow and started to search for his cigarette case.

Outside, as the current flowed into the magnets, the drifting globe had swerved in one last wild pounce at the ship, and now clung there like a limpet.

Two space-suit-clad figures emerged from the port and walked along the side of the ship on their magnetic soles. Reaching the globe, they slid it back along the metal hull and into the air lock. It was trundled in on to the main deck, and a hand threw an electric blanket over it to even up the temperature before they went to work on it.

An hour later Captain Troyte received the bunch of papers taken from the message compartment of the globe. He read them through with some surprise and incredulity. Then he picked up the telephone and spoke to the navigator.

"Where's Pomona Negra?" he enquired.

"Where's what, sir?"

"Pomona Negra. I gather it's an asteroid."

"I'll ring you back, sir."

The navigator came through with his information a few minutes later after consulting his tables.

"Pretty nearly at the other side of its orbit now, sir."

"Other side of the sun, in fact?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, that lets us out," said the Captain, gratefully. He sent the papers over to the radio operator with instructions to transmit to Chapman Station, Mars, in their entirety.

"Gawd," said the operator. "All that lot! Pity we ever hooked that perishing globe."

Which was truer than he knew.

CHAPTER II

(Digest of information contained in message globe secured by the Madge G. 6 January 2051. Originals signed by D. L. Foggatt, Master).

AT 10.50—hrs. 20 December 2049, the Research ship *Joan III*, owned by Tempel Lines, London, and under my command, encountered a space phenomenon hitherto unobserved, or, to the best of my knowledge, unrecorded. One moment all was as usual; the next, without perceptible impact or shock, all instruments were obscured and all windows with them, and radio reception decreased to an almost inaudible whisper.

The *Joan III*, three months out from Gillington, Mars, is engaged on exploratory work in the asteroid belt. My crew is composed of men experienced in difficult and dangerous work of the kind, but none of them is acquainted either personally or by hearsay with circumstances like those in which we now find ourselves. Leaving Mars we struck outward in the plane of the ecliptic. Upon approaching the Belt we turned, maneuvering our approach upon a tangent, and gradually edging our way into the main path at a speed approximately that of the asteroids themselves.

Travelling with them thus and in

their orbit, we settled too our work of plotting and charting—copies of such charts being enclosed herewith. For the following four weeks we moved with caution and restraint in that section of the Belt dominated by the large asteroid Pomona Negra, continuing our work of classification and description of the bodies, and occasionally putting investigating parties aground on certain asteroids, though without making discoveries of more than minor interest. Noting untoward, nothing, in fact, but events of ordinary routine occurred, until on 19th December we sighted a red asteroid.

This we judged to be a body of no great size, estimating its diameter at some three miles, but at a considerable distance from us. It was distinguished from all other objects as a brilliant scarlet crescent glowing almost as though it were afire. Detailed study of it was difficult by reason of other bodies of varying sizes which frequently interposed themselves in the distance that separated us from it. After consideration I gave orders to suspend other work while we investigated the matter. After we had been picking our way towards it for some two hours it was observed that other and smaller asteroids in its neighborhood were also glowing redly, though whether we had failed to detect them earlier or whether they had only recently become red I am unable to say. They also were difficult to observe on account of erratic and puzzling obscurations. Approximately three hours after first sighting the red asteroid the sudden masking of our instruments and windows occurred.

AT ONCE I sent out the 2nd Officer and one of the men to investigate the cause. Radio communication between their space-suits and our headsets was found to be unimpeded.

I asked what the trouble was. The 2nd Officer answered me.

"I can't say, sir. It's a red stuff—red as blood. The whole ship's cov-

ered in it, as though she's been through a bath of paint."

I inquired what kind of "red stuff".

Kind of slimy, sir, like—like a half melted jelly, only not transparent."

"That's not a lot of help," I said. "Anyway, the first thing to do is to clean it off the instrument glasses and then off the windows."

"Aye, aye, sir," he acknowledged.

I ordered the lights in the navigation room switched off, and we were able to see that the darkness was not complete. Experimentally we unshuttered one of the windows sunward and found the glass behind to be shining with a fierce red glow. The navigator reported that one of his instruments had been cleared to a usable condition, and the internal lights were switched on again.

We could hear the two men outside commenting on the unpleasant stickiness of the stuff they were clearing from a second instrument glass.

"Hullo, Navigator. How's that?" asked the Second.

"Okay," replied the Navigator. "But the first one's clouded over again."

There was a pause, then:

"That's funny," said the Second. "It's almost as thick as before. Just a minute, I'll give it another wipe."

For some moments there was silence. Then the other man's voice said in thoughtful surprise:

"Good Lord! This is a thing!"

"What's the matter, Mr. Docker?" I asked.

"It's queer, sir," replied the Second. "I wiped some of it off, and then while we looked at it the edges of the smear started to creep over the glass again. They're still doing it. Not exactly flowing back like a liquid: kind of encroaching, it's... There, it's covered the glass completely again."

"The other instrument's obscured again, too," the Navigator put in.

"Well—" began the Second. Then he stopped and we heard him mutter; "Good God—" A moment later

he added, as if to his companion: "What is it?"

"Well, what *is* it?" I repeated in irritation.

"I don't know, sir. It seems to be something that—that grows."

"All the same we must have those instruments clear," I said.

"No good, sir," he answered. "It grows back on them as fast as we can move it. It's growing over us too, sir. It's spreading up the suits. It's above our knees and on our sleeves half way up to the shoulder already."

I considered. Then I asked:

"Are we clear of all bodies?"

"Yes, sir. Nothing within miles of us."

"All right then, one of you come inboard and we'll have a look at the stuff. The other to remain on watch."

"Aye, aye, sir," the Second responded.

HALF A minute later a weird figure emerged from the air lock. His trunk was clad in the usual grey space-suit, but both arms and legs were enveloped in a brilliant scarlet.

The stuff glistened and did not look inviting to the touch. I scraped some of it off his sleeve with the blade of a knife and looked at it closely beneath the light. Quite perceptibly it was creeping up the clean part of the blade, and it seemed, as the Second had said, to grow rather than flow.

The other men in the room stood round regarding the man in the space-suit curiously. One of them gave a sudden exclamation and pointed to his feet and the deck behind him. We looked down and saw the red film spreading out across the steel floor, not only from his feet as he stood, but from each footprint he had left in walking from the airlock. It was visibly, though slowly, extending even as we looked at it, and the substance on the man had passed beyond his arms to crawl on to his chest and shoulders.

I told a man to fetch blowtorches,

and placed the knife carefully on to the floor near to the spreading mess. Instinctively we all avoided touching it while we waited.

The man returned with three blowtorches. When we'd started them up we tried one on a patch of the stuff on the floor. I think we all felt considerable relief when we saw the substance shrivel, smoke and char in the flame. The torches did not take long to destroy all that was left on the floor. The man in the spacesuit had made no attempt to remove his equipment and the torches could be run over him as he stood without injuring the insulating surface. It was a lucky state for him; how the stuff can be cleared from an inflammable or delicate surface such as clothes or the unprotected body we do not know.

By the time the last traces of the red stuff had been cleared the radio-operator was reporting that he was receiving no reply to his calls, and that reception was faint and growing fainter even on full power. It appeared that the red substance must have some masking or leakage effect on the hull-aerial system.

The Second Officer came through again on the headset. He reported that the coating on the ship appeared to be building up and thickening.

"How's it with you?" I asked.

"It's all over me now, sir. I have to keep wiping the face plate every half minute or so to see at all. Otherwise I'm okay, sir."

There was no falling off in his transmission which suggested that we had been right in assuming that interference with the hull-aerial system was the trouble. The radio operator decided to see if he could rig a serviceable internal aerial. So far, twenty-four hours later, he had not been successful in achieving transmission—at least, we were without replies to his messages.

IT IS DIFFICULT to see what can be done. Were we near any body with an atmosphere we might try by travelling reverse and flying into the blast of our own main tubes

to burn ourselves clear of the mess; but, unfortunately, the only place with an atmosphere within many hundred thousand miles is Mars which we can have no hope of reaching with our instruments out of commission.

The only other way which suggests itself to us is the construction of some kind of pressure torches operated from our main full supply with which we may be able to incinerate the stuff, the engineers are at present attempting to construct devices of the kind.

Whether, if they are successful, it will be possible to carry out the operation in space we cannot say. We are therefore cautiously and by visual findings only of an officer on outside watch in the direction of Pomona Negra on which asteroid we can ground if necessary.

In the twenty-four hours which has passed since we encountered the red substance I have myself been outside twice to inspect the vessel. There is no doubt whatever that the layer which covers us is increasing in thickness, and in traversing the side of the vessel one's feet slide through it as through a semi-liquid mud. The officer on watch is covered with the stuff so as to be almost indistinguishable from the ship, and is under the necessity of wiping it from the face-plate of his helmet several times in a minute.

The nature of the substance we have not been able to determine since we dare not retain a specimen inside the ship for examination. It is necessary to be most thorough in the decontamination of all persons re-entering after duty outside as any minute particle overlooked is capable of growing with surprising speed. The airlock so rapidly began to choke that it has to be decontaminated after every entrance or exit.

From superficial examination it has occurred to us that the substance may be some algae-like form capable of sustaining life by the creation of light alone, and of transferring this nourishment throughout the whole, though we are aware that

this is somewhat in conflict with its observed ability to grow or reproduce itself within the ship as swiftly as without.

It has been decided to send out these particulars and other documents in a message globe lest we should be unable to establish radio-communication. The despatch port will be cleared on the outer side by specially modified blow-lamps so that it is hoped that the globe may be released without contamination.

Any vessel approaching us should be warned of the highly active nature of the substance, and is advised not to make use of magnetic grapples or any other devices which may give a physical link with the ship.

The date beneath the signature of the Master to the full version of the above report was 21st December 2049.

CHAPTER III

IN THE 10th of February of the current year, a little over a month of the finding of the message-globe, the *Annabelle*, a service and research ship out of Gillington, Mars, made rendezvous with the Space-Control's vessel, *Circe*, despatched from Mexico, Earth, by way of Clarke Station.

The *Annabelle* pulled into the appointed area situated within the Asteroid Belt in the sector of Pomona Negra to find the *Circe* already arrived and lying idle at orbit speed as she waited. Even as his braking tubes went into action Captain Richard Bentley of the *Annabelle* made personal radio report to his opposite number in the other ship, and announced himself.

"Oh, it's you, Dick, is it? responded the *Circe's* Captain, with a tinge of relief evident in his tone. "They didn't tell me who'd be in your ship. Glad you're here. I'd a nasty feeling it might be one of those trip-round-the-Moon merchants—you never can tell with Head Office. I think the best thing would be for you to come over and have a chat once you're up to us. Suit you?"

Bentley agreed. The *Annabelle* continued to brake smoothly until she too was down to orbit speed. Then, with occasional little tufts of flame from one steering tube and then another her pilot expertly manoeuvred her until she lay close in to the other ship. A magnetic grapple floated out towards the *Circe* with its cable looping lazily behind it. It moved a trifle wide of the ship and looked likely to miss it, but a momentary touch of current down the cable caused it to veer in the right direction. A minute or two later it made contact on the hull and clamped itself there as the power was switched on. Captain Bentley emerged, space-suited, from the airlock of his ship, laid hold of the cable and pulled himself across the void which separated the two. He seemed to swim through the black emptiness, using only one hand on the rope with a dexterity which revealed experience.

Inside the *Circe's* lock Captain Waterson greeted him and, after he had got rid of the suit, led the way to his cabin. He handed the visitor a drink in a space-bottle, tapped a globule into his own mouth from another with the skill of long practice, and lit a cigarette. Dick Bentley lit one also and inhaled.

"Lucky man," he said, "Our owners don't allow smoking."

"Bad luck," said Captain Waterson. "Anybody would think we were sailing in wood and paper ships to read some Company's rules. They want to spend some time in space and learn that a contented crew is more important. Well, now, what about this business?"

"I don't know any more than there is in Foggatt's report."

"Nor does space-control. That's why we're here. They want all the details we can get."

"What's your own view?" Bentley asked.

"I'm not forming any views yet, but I'm not discounting anything Foggett says; he is—or was—a sound man. It's clear that Space-Control takes it seriously or they wouldn't have arranged for the two

of us to be on the job."

Bentley nodded.

"Well, you're in charge, Tom. What's the plan?"

"We've got two jobs really. One is to locate the *Joan III* and give all assistance we can. The other is to find some of this red stuff Foggatt talks about. Learn what we can about it, and collect some specimens for examination at home."

Bentley nodded again.

THERE shouldn't be a lot of difficulty about the second part. From Foggatt's account of the red asteroids I gather he thought that it existed on them. They're somewhere in this area, so they ought not to be hard to find. What isn't at all clear is how the *Joan III* became covered with the stuff. If the report's right it didn't gradually grow over her. The instrument glasses and windows were all covered at once more or less the same moment."

"I know," Captain Waterson agreed. "It would seem almost as if she ran through a cloud of the stuff just lying about in space, as it were. Queer things *do* lie about in space.... I've seen one or two myself in my time, but all the same... Besides, how was it they didn't spot it before they ran into it? They don't seem to have had a suspicion there was anything there."

"There was some reference to obstruction of observations at the time," Dick Bentley recalled, "though it seemed as if it referred to intervening flocks of petty asteroids...."

"H'm. Well if we find them maybe we'll learn a bit more,—but it's a big if. Nearly fourteen months now since they sent off that globe. Seems to me one of the things we've got to keep a sharp look out for round these parts is that we don't get into the same kind of mess they did."

"Maybe that's why they sent the two of us," Bentley suggested, thoughtfully.

They got down to the details of operation. There could be no doubt about the first move. It would be to examine the Asteroid, Pomona Negra, for any signs that the *Joan III* had indeed landed there as her intention had been. It was quite pos-

sible that crippled as she was on the navigation side and depending only on the directions of a lookout who would find difficulty in the conditions in using even field-glasses, she had been unable to reach it. If neither she nor any sign of her presence was to be seen, there would be a further conference on the method of search to be adopted.

Captain Bentley was content to leave the arrangement at that when he returned to the *Annabelle*. Half an hour later the two ships, at a speed very little above that of the asteroids themselves began to nose their way with a delicate fastidiousness into the Belt in the direction of Pomona Negra.

The next days were tedious with slow movement. The imperative quality was caution. It was impossible to observe and avoid all contact with asteroids which travelled not only in swarms, but often solitary and might be in size anything from a pebble to a large building, and therefore necessary to limit their speed to one at which the larger bodies could be seen and avoided, and glancing or direct blows from the smaller would do no harm. For all on board the ships, it was a disagreeable period of weariness which frayed the nerves and shortened the tempers.

Were Pomona Negra an outflieger such as Pallas or Eros, approach would be simpler; unfortunately she holds an orbit of low inclination to the ecliptic and travels attended by considerable ruck of cosmic debris, and there is no path to her that does not require patience and caution. Almost two weeks passed before *Circe* signalled observation of a body .75 miles in diameter in the position nominally occupied by Pomona Negra.

Bentley contacted Captain Waterson:

"What's this 'nominally' stuff, Tom? There can scarcely be two asteroids of that size around here."

"That's just the trouble, Dick. If Pomona Negra means anything it should be The Black Apple—because, presumably, the thing's black. This isn't—it's bright scarlet."

"Oh-ho," murmured Bentley thoughtfully.

"Exactly my sentiments. Oh-ho, followed by, now what?"

"Well—what?"

"Investigate cautiously. Decrease speed, proceed with added care to avoid any suspicious object or substance. Pick your own course—it's wiser to separate in case whatever the *Joan III* ran into is hanging around. Rendezvous twenty-five mile level to sunward of Pomona. Keep in radio touch. In case of radio failure the ship in trouble will reduce to Pomona's orbit speed and the other ship will go to her aid. Got it?"

"Okay. That's clear. And at the rendezvous we inspect and decide further?"

"That's it. Good luck, Dick."

"And to you, Tom."

THREE DAYS later the two ships hung at the appointed twenty-five miles above the surface of the reputed Pomona Negra. No one had the least doubt that it was the right asteroid, but the name was now thoroughly inappropriate; no single spot of black was visible on its surface.

Bentley, visiting the *Circe* once more, suggested that the first thing to do was to recommend that its name be changed to Pomona Rosa.

They looked out of the window at it: a globe of scarlet touched here and there by the fall of the light with a faint oily iridescence. The surface was smooth, fat, bulgingly unpleasant as if distended. More than anything else it reminded Bentley of a boil, angry and bloated with pressure.

Captain Waterson's expression as he gazed at it was serious.

"That thing," he said, "should be a ball of rough black rock. Instead, it's a perfectly smooth globe. God knows what quantity of the stuff there must be to have levelled off over all that area. The rate of growth! It doesn't bear thinking about."

"Assuming that the *Joan III* brought it here, you mean."

"I think we're justified in that. It can't have been like this before or Foggatt would have noticed it and reported it."

"He did report some of those red asteroids," Bentley reminded him.

"But nothing like this. We saw some small ones ourselves some twenty-four hours back, a few twenty or thirty footers, I expect you did. This is colossal, horrible—And it must have overrun the whole thing in less than fourteen months: that's what gets me. I'd not believe it possible anything could grow at such a rate. Think of the area it covers!"

They gazed down in silence for some minutes on the asteroid. The more Bentley looked at it the less he liked it, for though at moments it had the aspect of a vast vivid pearl, its constant suggestion was repulsively obscene tumescence.

"What do you suppose it is?" he asked at length.

Waterson shrugged his shoulders.

"What is life anyway?—some kind of seed floating about the universe until it finds suitable conditions to develop? May be. Lord knows what there may be in all this Space. Perhaps we were once a few chance spores; perhaps there are a lot of different kinds of life floating about waiting for time to give them their chance..."

"Still, that's for the scientists to argue about when they get some of the stuff. The present question is what about Foggatt and the *Joan III*?"

Bentley stared down at the red mass.

"I'm afraid there's not much question there. Even if they could keep the stuff out of the ship, and manage to survive as long as this—which is doubtful, what is there to be done about it? Nothing if they're buried in all that muck. You could try full power on the radio, but it's unlikely, by the report, to reach them—and even if it could, it's highly improbable that they've had anyone listening on the chance all this time. Honestly, I don't see that there is anything to be done, poor devils."

Waterson pondered, and then agreed reluctantly.

"Nor do I, hanged if I do. I'm afraid that was finish for poor old Foggatt and his lot. Still, I shall go down and take a closer look—there might be something though I doubt it. Anyway, I've got to get the specimens. Your job'll be to hang around here and keep an eye on things."

"Okay, Tom. For Heaven's sake be careful, though."

"Oh, I'm not going to take any risks. Just shoot down some automatically closing specimen bottles and have a man standing by to burn them clean when we haul them up again. Simple. No, I'm not taking any chances with that stuff. Loathsome looking muck, it is."

BACK ON THE *Annabelle*, Bentley watched the *Circe* go down on a spiral matched to the rotation of the scarlet globe. Through the instruments they watched the shuttle-like, silver shape level off a mile or less above the surface and set itself to circle the asteroid.

"What's it look like from there, *Circe*?" the *Annabelle's* navigator asked his opposite number.

"More revolting, if possible," the other assured him. "Like a mass of red mucous; disgusting. Not altogether staple, either. Unless it's a trick of the light, there seems to be undulations in it. Might be a sort of tidal movement—or it might be something to do with its metabolism as it revolves, if Foggatt's notion of its drawing sustenance from sunlight is right. Going to make a circuit now."

Reception faded as the *Circe* passed round the other side of the monstrosity, and came back as she reappeared.

"The same all the way round," said her navigator. "Just a nasty big blob. Another circuit at 90 degrees now."

He watched the silver shape turn into line with the axis of the body and disappear over the nearer pole. No great time elapsed before it came into sight again flashing in the sunlight on the opposite side.

"From what you can see in the dark round there, there's no distinguishing feature anywhere," came the navigator's voice again. "Going down now. Descending to 300 feet, to take samples."

From the *Annabelle* it looked as though the other ship were stationary. Only the reports of her navigator's voice as he gave decreasing altitudes told them that she was actually sinking closer to the viscous surface. They heard him sing out: "Three hundred" and then: "Aye, aye, sir," and, after a pause: "Two hundred, and steady, sir."

Through the *Annabelle's* instruments it was possible to discern some kind of disturbance on the red surface below the other ship. A sort of tide or tremor in roughly circular ripples seemed to be running through the mass. At first Bentley attributed it to the impact of the sample bottles which, he judged would now have been propelled into the substance, and thought it in consequence to be in a much more liquid state than he had hitherto imagined. Then he realised uneasily that the ripples were not spreading outwards as from a stone dropped into water but inwards. He doubted if the effect were as clearly observable from the close range of the other ship, and leaned over to speak into the navigator's phone.

"*Circe*. There's something queer going on just below you," he said.

A voice came back:

"It's okay, sir. Just the effect of—S'trewh!"

Bentley turned back to his instrument just in time to catch a glimpse of the cause of the exclamation.

The stuff had gathered in a kind of mound beneath the *Circe*, and flung out towards her a vast shapeless limb of itself, a reaching pseudopod like a licking red tongue.

Those on board wasted no time. There was a gush from the *Circe's* main tubes, and she leapt forward like a flash. But swift as she was, she did not draw clear in time. She tore through the top of the extending tongue like a streak and emerged

from it with speed undiminished, but she was no longer a silver ship: from bow to tubes she was coated in brilliant scarlet.

AT ONCE, with her hull aerial system fouled, radio communication died. Captain Bentley seized a headset of the type built into space suits, and began calling. Evidently Waterson had done the same. His first remarks were vivid, but unprintable. Bentley waited for the picturesqueness to subside.

"You all right?" he asked.

"What do you mean, 'all right'? The main radio's dead, and we can't see a bloody thing outside, otherwise I suppose we are. Except that we'll have lost the man in the air-*lode* putting down the bottles, I'm afraid."

Another voice cut in, speaking somewhat unsteadily:

"I'm still here, sir, in the lock. Must have been knocked kind of silly for a minute when we started like that."

"Good man. Look here—"

Bentley broke in on them:

"Tom, what about braking? You're still running free, you know."

"God, yes!" He heard Captain Waterson shout orders for deceleration equal to previous impetus.

The man in the lock spoke again.

"The place is crawling with this ruddy muck, sir."

"Is the outer door damaged?"

There was a pause.

"No, it's shut all right, sir."

"Good. Well, keep it shut. You've still got the blow torch?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right. Clean up with it as much as you can in there. Don't touch your suit fastenings. When you come out I'll have a couple of chaps here with torches to finish it off. That clear?"

"Aye, aye, sir."

CAPTAIN WATERSON turned his attention back to Bentley and the *Annabelle*.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"About three hundred miles sunward from Pomona," Dick told him.

"You made some jump. We're coming up to you now. You're lying pretty well at orbit speed. Hold it like that."

"We're covered in the stuff, I take it?"

"Every inch". He caused for another burst of lurid comment which ended with Waterson's enquiry:

"What the hell do we do now?"

"I suggest I try to burn you clean."

"How?"

"First thing, I'm going to send over two grappels, one to bow and the other to stern."

"The stuff will spread back along the cables to you."

"We can take care of that. The thing I want to know is can you roll your ship? Without giving any directional movement, I mean."

"Roll? What; you mean horizontally?"

"Sure."

"God knows. In all my years in Space I've never even wanted to try. You'd better speak to the engineer about that. What if we can?"

"Then I turn my tubes on to you. That ought to burn pretty near anything off."

"It'll shove you away."

"Not if I put on the braking tubes to balance the thrust."

"H'm. It's an idea," approved Captain Waterson. "Yes, it's worth trying—only don't go and concertina your ship in between the two thrusts."

"We'll take good care of that,"

Bentley assured him, and turned to his preparations.

The two magnets were floated out, and since accurate placing was necessary, were guided into position by space-suited men equipped with propulsive pistols. The two men took good care to project themselves back from the red hull before contact was made. The rest watching intently from the *Annabelle's* windows broke into comments; within half a minute it was possible to see the red substance begin to swarm up the sides of the magnets; in four it was starting to travel along the cables connecting the ships. Once it had

begun, it continued to extend along them at a surprising rate. Then, some fifty out from the *Circe*, it came to an obstruction. The *Annabelle's* men watched anxiously, and then relaxed for the progress of the red substance was checked. It had encountered the three foot sections that had been wrapped in asbestos and bound with wire which now glowed incandescent, and it did not like them. The advance was stopped, and it contented itself with thickening upon that part of the cable already covered.

The *Annabelle* manoeuvred delicately to place herself stern on to the other ship, and slightly closed the distance between them.

"Hello, *Circe*," Bentley called. "I'm about to start. Have your outside party ready with lamps to mop up when we finish. Be ready to start rolling when I give the word—and make it as slow as you can."

A blaze began to glow from both forward and stern tubes of the *Annabelle*. Gradually it increased to a blast of fire gushing out from the stern tubes to envelope the scarlet ship in a roaring gale of fire. The effect upon the substance was immediate and encouraging. Under the scaring heat the red coating shrivelled, smoked and blackened.

"Roll *Circe*. Gently over," Bentley ordered.

SLOWLY, still bathed in the fiery spume, the *Circe* began to turn on one side, and as the further side rolled into the heat the scarlet vanished to leave nothing but a sticky, incinerated mess.

Bentley was being cautious. The *Circe* made six complete revolutions before he gave her the word to stop, and shut off his tubes.

A moment after she had ceased to turn half a dozen men with their adapted torches already lighted emerged from the air lock and scattered about the hull. Another half dozen joined them a minute later, and already a party was floating across from the *Annabelle* to join them. They found the smooth hull sterilized of all life. The remains were now no more than an inert

rough covering baked on like a black varnish. Even so, the stuff had not been completely eliminated. Where there were crevices or angles protecting it from the direct flame it had managed to survive the heat of the metal beneath it, and with a persistent tenacity was starting to spread again from such sheltered spots as the bunched flanges mounting fore and rear tubes and others which had chanced to lie in the lee of some projection. The men swarmed around the danger points playing their flames into any and every cranny which had the least chance of holding a grain of the scarlet pest intact. After an hour's work they were satisfied that the last vestige save for that enclosed in the specimen bottles had been completely exterminated. Nevertheless, Captain Waterson was taking no chances; when his men were called in, an outside party of four remained on watch, ready to pounce upon the first speck of red they might spy.

He and Bentley adjourned to his cabin, and toasted the occasion.

"Well, thank God they did send two ships—most intelligent thing I've ever known them do," he said. "Even after Foggatt's report I didn't realise what a hell-brewed stuff it is until it got us. But for you, Dick—". He shrugged and turned his thumbs down.

"Well, hang it, that's what I was here for, wasn't it? But I'm afraid it makes it pretty certain what happened to the *Joan III*."

Waterson nodded, and looked out of the windows towards the red globe which was Pomona.

"It does, Dick. That'll be the report. If they want to find her now, they've got to find some means of clearing away that muck. God, if that stuff did get at them—horrible! Why, it'd smother and blind you within five minutes."

"And that's all we've got to tell 'em," Bentley said.

"Yes, that's it,—but we've got samples of the stuff. I suppose that's the really important thing. It may save others from going the way Foggatt did—and we nearly did."

Some few hours later the two

ships turned sunward and began again their wearisome, cautious progress. Clear of the Belt they put on speed, risking the outflinders, and their ways diverged. The *Annabelle* set course for her home port on Mars. The *Circe* to return to Earth by way the Clarke Lunar Station.

CHAPTER IV

WHAT HAPPENED while Captain Waterson and his crew relaxed and slept in the resthouse at Clarke Station during the period when the *Circe* was refuelled, checked and inspected preparatory to her home drop to Earth remains a mystery at present, and one to be cleared up at the official enquiry before the Space Control Commissioners.

It is difficult to believe that any member of the ship's company, after their recent experience, would be either careless or negligent where the red substance was concerned. The specimen bottles are said to have been locked into a steel cupboard in the Captain's cabin. If they were, and it is believed that evidence on this point is unimpeachable, then it would seem that one of two things must have happened; either some person moved by curiosity or the hope of a valuable find broke into that cupboard and opened one or more bottles; or some of the containers were faulty or damaged and the contents leaked—it would be able to pass beyond the door since an airtight fit for lockers and cupboards are not normally safe equipment in space. Possibly we shall never be certain which was the cause.

Whatever took place, the lamentable fact is that no report of the leakage was made until several hours later. That much is clear for the first party to notice a pool of 'red jelly' found its edges already some yards from the ship. They were interested, but not alarmed, taking it at first for a pool of some kind of lubricant, and had even walked several steps into it before paying it serious attention. It then occurred to the leader that the extent was greater than he had supposed, and thinking it

likely that it might be some kind of fuel and possibly dangerous, he ordered his men back and went to report. Thus both he and his men spread it further on their boots.

The Station Official on duty who accompanied him to make examination was better informed, and realised what it was, but in his inexperience lacked the caution to avoid all contact with it. By the time the news of the outbreak reached Captain Waterson it was spreading in all directions from trails left by men who had stepped in it and others who had crossed them; half a dozen offices were already infected, and a number of workers daubed scarlet from head to foot were spreading it further every minute.

CONFUSION followed. Efforts were made to remove all uncontaminated ships, and force had to be used to prevent the Captains taking off in craft which had been contaminated. There is nothing to be gained by minimising the fact that for a time a regrettable state of panic reigned. But it is to the credit of certain officials that no infected ship did, in fact, succeed in leaving during that time.

Little could be done. The only torches modified to work in airless conditions were aboard the *Circe*. Had they been available they were too few and too small to have appreciable effect upon the area now affected. Fuel was plentiful but since it will not burn without an atmosphere, it was impossible to ring the area with fire.

So far it has been impossible to check the spread of the substance. Fire projectors of various kinds are being adapted as quickly as possible and will be rushed to the scene via the Whitley Lunar Station as soon as they are available. Every precaution is being taken against the starting of new outbreaks.

The state is one of the gravest emergency calling for the enlistment of all scientific effort. Not only is our whole system of space navigation based upon use of the Moon as a way

(Please Turn To Page 90)

MARVEL SCIENCE - FICTION QUIZ

by The Editors

(Science For The Future Man)

So you think you know your science? To get the most out of a science-fiction magazine you should. The following questions should test your skill along these lines. If your score is two-hundred, you're a twenty-first century Einstein; if it's one-seventy or better you're a first-class astrologer. One-forty through one-sixty makes you a neophyte sterman, and if you score one-hundred or better you're ready for astrologation school on Luna. A total under a hundred shows that you have a lot of boning up to do.

PART I

Each of the following questions on astrologation is worth ten points.

1. If you could travel at the speed of light (186,000 miles per second) how long would it take you to reach Proxima Centauri, the nearest fixed star?
2. If you suddenly found that Pluto was closer to the sun than Neptune, would you check your instruments to see if something was wrong?
3. Why would you need considerably less power to blast your rocket off from the surface of the moon than from your home port on Earth?
4. What is the furthest celestial object that we can see from Earth with the unaided eye?
5. If there were any life on the surface of the moon which faces the Earth, would astronomers be able to detect it with the 200 inch Mount Palomar telescope?

PART II

Take your choice on these, with ten points for each right answer:

1. Hyper-space is: a) The deep space which exists between the galaxies, b) The medium through which spacemen would travel to avoid the vast distances of interstellar space, c) The vacuum that exists outside the gravitational pull of any major heavenly body.
2. If you met an android (in science-fiction parlance) you would be confronted with: a) The giant brain of a highly evolved, once-human creature, b) A many-tentacled space-being, c) An artificial man made from synthetic flesh.
3. Hydroponics is: a) A way of growing plants artificially, without the use of soil, b) A method in which power is obtained from water, c) A system of studying the ocean bottom by means of bathespheres.
4. If you took a spaceship into Saturn's rings you would encounter: a) Three independent gaseous rings, b) A horde of meteoric particles, c) A sea of liquid methane.
5. A man born with six fingers on each hand would be: a) A misanthrope, b) An atavism, c) A mutant.

For ten points each, pair a term from the second column with its companion in the first.

PART III

1. Sirius B
2. Lightning
3. Ganymede
4. Antares
5. Tyrannosaurus Rex
6. Heavy water

- a. Men six times more susceptible than women.
- b. Pre-mammalian animal.
- c. Exterior galaxy.
- d. A white dwarf star.
- e. Water under pressure.
- f. Comet due to appear in 1957.
- g. A red-giant star.
- h. Important product in manufacture of hydrogen-bomb.
- i. Friction of clouds rubbing together.
- j. Fourth satellite of Jupiter.

Answers To
Quiz on Page
90

PART IV

Again for ten points per question, decide if each of the following is true or false.

1. Cybernetics is a new science of the human mind.
2. Due to poisonous gases in its atmosphere, there is probably no life on the planet Venus.
3. Chlorophyll is the substance from which chloroform is made.
4. Isobars are mysterious straight-line markings on the polar-caps of Mars.

AMAZING SCIENCE ADVENTURES

THROUGH THE CURTAIN of TOMORROW, with the SCIENCE OF TODAY!

BEYOND PLUTO BY J. C. ROGERS

THE GREAT two-hundred inch eye of Mount Palomar, which can bring the surface of the moon to an apparent visual magnitude of eight miles, continues to make important astronomical discoveries every day. The latest is this:

The distant planet Pluto, which takes two hundred and fifty years to swing in its leisurely path around the sun, is much smaller than has been supposed in the past. In fact, through observation with the Palomar giant, its diameter has been determined at 3600 miles, making it the smallest planet except for Mercury, with a mass no greater than one-tenth that of earth.

In 1930 Pluto's position had been ascertained by perturbations in the orbit of the planet Neptune, and the ninth planet's existence was then verified by a photographic plate. But the Palomar discovery leads to new problems. The size of Pluto is not sufficient to account for the peculiarities in Neptune's path around the sun, and so it must be supposed that there is an additional planet or planets—*beyond Pluto*. Planet X of science-fiction, it seems, is about to find a place in the sun, and the Palomar men can be expected to discover it in the immediate future.

As a matter of fact, it has been determined that the sun's pull of gravity extends perhaps fifty times further than Pluto's four-billion mile orbit—and there's no reason in the world to suppose that there are not five, or ten, or twenty transPlutonian planets which await discovery. It seems that far Pluto is just one of the inner planets!

NATURE'S GIANT COSMIC BOMBS BY FRANK J. WELLINGTON

WITHIN THE past year, a group of Canada's scientists journeyed to the

MARVEL'S SPECIAL FEATRE

northernmost part of this continent to make a startling discovery. There they found an unnaturally round lake (rumors of which had sent them there in the first place.) The lake is more than two miles wide, and the scientists were unable to fathom its silent depths. But of the following fact they are sure:

This is no natural lake. It is a giant hole in the Earth, crushed and beaten out of the living rock by the fall of a heavenly body within the last five thousand years!

Just a moment ago, as cosmic time is reckoned, a meteor, comet, or asteroid plummeted earthward to make that hole—and purely by accident it was not five thousand years later and not over the city of New York, where it would have made the mightiest of hydrogen bombs look like a Fourth of July firecracker.

This is not the only mute testimony we have to nature's giant cosmic bombs. Near Flagstaff Arizona there is a great crater almost a mile wide and several hundred feet deep, evidence of the fall of a small comet some time within the last fifty thousand years. And scattered over the surface of the Earth there are other holes to record the impact of cosmic debris.

We have our atmosphere to thank for the fact that the Earth's surface is not scarred and pock-marked like that of the moon. It has been estimated that over a hundred million meteors enter our atmosphere from deepest space in every twenty-four hour period, but fortunately our atmosphere consumes most of them in their downward flight. Should another big baby like the Arizona monster enter our atmosphere tomorrow, and should it, say, fall upon the teeming metropolis of Chicago, it would destroy the huge city utterly—and man would know just how puny he is.

THE KINGSLAYER BY ROBERT KENNETH

THE SCIENCE of anthropology has unearthed many strange forms of kingship, but perhaps the strangest is that which existed in primitive Aricia, in Italy.

If you lived in ancient Aricia some three hundred years B.C. you might see a strange figure brooding on the northern shore of the lake which borders the city. You would see the grim figure prowling during the day and on into the night. In his hands he carries a sword, and he peers warily in all directions, as if expecting the sudden attack of an enemy. He is a priest and a murderer; and the enemy who seeks him out would murder him and hold the priesthood and kingship in his stead. Such was the rule of office—a candidate only succeeded to office by murdering the incumbent king, and then he would wait, prowling around his throne, until a stronger, craftier candidate slayed him where he stood.

Year in and year out, in good weather and in bad, he had to keep his watch—and a moment of uneasy slumber could well mean his death. And each winter night when the dark and uneasy hills beyond the lake closed in upon him, when the somber shadows of the trees cast their spell and lulled him to sleep, one can picture him beating his hands against his chest in a futile effort to ward off the slumber that would mean his death, pacing back and forth near the crystal surface of the lake, a king whose more ambitious subjects wanted him dead so that they might reign in his stead.

Such was the kingship in ancient Aricia—and with that in our cultural background, need we wonder at the strange forms of rule and dictatorship which sometimes cast their power over some of the world's nations like a dirty old cloak...?

INTERPLANETARY ASTRONOMY BY WILLIAM L. TAYLOR

WHEN ASKED to name five of the most important advances in astronomy

made in the twentieth century, famous Astronomer Harlow Shapley named the following: radio astronomy, the concept of spiral galaxies, the designing and building of great telescopes, confirmation of the theory of relativity, and the analysis of stellar motions.

Let's take all this one step further—let's bring it into the twenty-first century, into tomorrow's world of science which is today's world of science-fiction.

One aspect of radio astronomy—the army's radar contact with the moon four years ago—has proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that practical communication in the vacuum of space (hence, communication between spaceship and spaceship) is both easy and relatively inexpensive. *Hello, Ma, I just arrived on Mars. How's the chicken farm on Ganymede!*

The concept of spiral galaxies—only a recently confirmed theory—pushes the limits of the universe out billions of times further than they had been heretofore supposed. When man actually conquers the solar system, the stars will remain for science-fiction, and when man in some distant future breaks his bonds of solar servitude and blasts through to the stars—the distant infinity of galaxies will remain for science-fiction—and as a challenge for mankind to catch up!

THE BUILDING of great telescopes has paved the way—for discovery in astronomy and for theory in science-fiction—but imagine how much more powerful the giant eyes would be without Earth's obscuring atmosphere as a medium with which to contend. When we see the moon through the Mount Palomar giant, it is at an apparent distance of from eight to nine miles—but it is seen through several hundred obscuring miles of Earth's thick, soupy atmosphere. Place that same telescope on the moon (which probably will be done after our first successful space trip) and think of the wonderful discoveries which could be made with it—without the intervention of a cloudy atmosphere!

Confirmation of the theory of relativity means something like this for the far distant future: Johnny X of Earth, off on a pleasure jaunt around the universe, will continue in one direction for the entire length of his trip. He will travel millions of light years, never altering his course, seeing a cross section of all that is to be seen—and then, still without altering his course, he will find himself suddenly back upon the surface of the Earth! That's what the theory of relativity claims—and astronomical observations have proven it.

And finally, the analysis of stellar motions in the world of the twenty-first century will be applied to that highly involved science, astrogation—a science which will make current navigation look a lot simpler than the multiplication table. Let's assume that we've reached a point where intergalactic travel is possible, and that we're on a spaceship in a far galaxy, trying to return to Earth. Here are some of the items which we must consider if we did not want to be hopelessly lost in deep space. The motion of the super-galaxy of which the Milky Way system is a member; the independent motion of the Milky Way Galaxy; the motion of the arm of the galaxy in which the sun moves; the motion of the swarm of stars to which the sun belongs; the independent motion through space of the sun; the motion of the earth as it revolves about the sun. Do that and then account for the red-shift—the expanding nature of our universe which has every galaxy moving away from every other galaxy—and you might possibly, just possibly, find little Earth. Good luck!

THE CHILD OF EUROPE BY WILLIAM L. TAYLOR

IN MONDAY afternoon in May, 1928, a strange young man staggered into the city of Nuremberg, in Germany. He did not stagger from any wound or physical hurt—apparently, he hardly knew how to walk.

From that date until the unsolved murder of Kasper Hauser in 1833, Nuremberg, Germany, and all of Europe was faced with what the Encyclopedia Britannica has called one of the most baffling mysteries in the history of man.

The mysterious youth—who knew only his name and a sentence or two of German which he spoke with an unknown foreign accent—was studied by all the leading scientists of the continent, without result. They never found where he came from or why or how, they never knew what his mission in Nuremberg was—nor did they know, for certain, why he was murdered, or by what means.

Upon his entrance into the city he was painfully ignorant of all the most elementary facts of everyday living: he hardly could walk; the few words he spoke were German, muttered with an accent which left all the linguists throwing their hands into the air hopelessly; he did not know how to eat properly and he had apparently never seen meat of any kind; clothing other than the simple, ill-fitting peasant garb which he wore fascinated him; and the whole world of colors and movement seemed something totally alien to him.

The city of Nuremberg adopted the youth and attempted to educate him—but soon he was known as "The Child of Europe" because of the universal scientific interest in him. When he could speak (he learned German rapidly, showing a keen, almost brilliant mind) he told a fantastic story. All he could remember was a dark cell and a hand which served him coarse bread and water through a slot. That and nothing more.

In 1829 he was found bleeding from a cut on his forehead, explaining that "a man in a black mask" had stabbed him. After that, two policemen were assigned to watch him night and day, but two years later he was wounded again, this time by a gun. Again, there were no clues to his assailant, and the police increased their vigil while the scientists studied Kaspar in vain to learn something about his identity.

On December 14, 1833, Kaspar ran through the snow out of a little park within the city, clutching his side. He staggered and fell, mortally wounded by what appeared to be the thrust of a knife, although no weapon was found. He died soon after that, muttering: "My God! That I should so die in shame and disgrace!"

That did not end the strange story of Kaspar Hauser. Police searched the park fruitlessly for the murder weapon—and strangest of all was the fact that they could find no footprints in the snow other than those that had been made by the fleeing Kaspar Hauser—yet he had been stabbed through the side of his rib-case, just below the heart, and medical men said the wound could not have been self-inflicted.

Kaspar Hauser came to Nuremberg suddenly—for an unknown reason. He died just as suddenly and just as mysteriously—an impossible, unearthly being who had found a home here on Earth for five short years. The politicians had one explanation—that Kaspar was a crown prince who had been spirited away in infancy so that a usurper might take the throne—but the scientists had quite another opinion, and this is best expressed by what the German, von Feuerbach, said:

Kaspar Hauser showed such an utter deficiency of words and ideas, such perfect ignorance of the commonest things and appearances of nature, and such horror of all customs, conveniences and necessities of civilized life...and such extraordinary peculiarities in his social, mental, and physical disposition, that one might feel oneself driven to the alternative of believing him to be a citizen of another planet, transferred...to our own.

There is the story of Kaspar Hauser, the Child of Europe—but the mystery is still unsolved. If Kaspar Hauser did come from another planet, what was his purpose here on Earth, and why was he murdered? One wonders, too, if the appearance of Kaspar Hauser at the gates

of Nuremberg was preceeded by the appearance in the sky of a nineteenth century flying saucer...

THE RED STUFF

(Continued From Page 85)

station so that without it we must become earthbound again until new and more powerful fleets have been constructed, but there is the menace of the red substance itself.

There is no need for panic, but it is necessary for every one to realize the full gravity of the situation. Whatever the cost, this substance must be prevented from spreading; above all, no grain of it must be allowed to reach Earth.

Volunteers are already fighting and dying on the Moon in order that that shall not happen. All our resources must back them without stint. Hope is expressed that certain radio-active materials may prove effective against the menace. Everything must be tried at all costs.

If anyone doubts the necessity of the sacrifices he may have to make, let him look through even a low-powered telescope at the Moon. A little east of Plato in the semi-circle of the Sinus Iridium, where Clarke Lunar Station used to stand, he will see a bright scarlet patch already flowing out across the Marc Imbrium. Let him imagine that it was not Clarke Station, but his own town that stood there, and let him make his sacrifices to prevent imagination becoming reality.

Answers to S-F Quiz on Page 86

Part I. 4.3 years; 2. Not at all—Pluto's orbit is so erratic that at times it actually is closer to the sun than Neptune; 3. Since the moon is so much smaller than the Earth, the speed of escape from its surface is considerably less; 4. The Great Spiral Nebula in Andromeda—at a distance close to a million light years; 5. Definitely. The Mount Palomar telescope brings the surface of the moon to an apparent visual distance of eight miles.

Part II. 1. b; 2. c; 3. a; 4. b; 5. c.

Part III. 1. d; 2. a; 3. j; 4. g; 5. b; 6. h.

Part IV. 1. False. Cybernetics is the study of thinking machines; 2. True—formaldehyde is particularly present; 3. False. Green plants produce sugar by means of chlorophyll. 4. False. Isobars are merely the weatherman's term for certain particular barometric regions of our atmosphere.



Josh looked back at
the opulent tower of
Teleport Incorporated . . .

THE LAST SPACEMAN

by Lester del Rey

CAPTAIN Josh Ames stopped at the bleak and pitted entrance to Marsport rocket-ground. His eyes noted the old scars of the starships, and the dust that

had blown over the marks, and his bushy, grey brows came down, almost hiding the pain that was in those eyes. Then he dropped his glance to the sack in his fingers,

Sure, business was business, and if they could teleport materials from here to infinity in exactly no time now, fine. But that didn't give them the right to make cracks about Captain Josh Ames' old starship

found a corner out of the thin wind, and began rolling a cigarette.

The crumbled, greenish tobacco had dried out too much in the arid atmosphere of Mars, and even the eddies of wind made it hard to roll. But he was used to the home-grown product of his ship's hydroponic tanks, and his fingers completed shaping the smoke almost automatically, twisting the ends, and lighting it. The first draw brought a dry dust with the smoke, setting him coughing, but he was used to that.

There'd been a time when he'd been able to find factory-made smokes on the outplanets, but the teleports had ended that, spreading the habit of the smoke-tubes from Aldebaran to Betelgeuse, and replacing the honest smell of tobacco with the perfumed stench of their drugs.

Damn the teleports! Josh looked back at the opulent tower of Teleport, Inc. Even at the distance from the main part of Marsport, he could see the trucks moving in a steady stream into the huge building.

But he jerked his eyes back to the field. After forty years of driving through the starways, it wasn't good to look at the nemesis that had killed the old stellar traffic. Sure, business was business; if they could teleport materials from here to infinity in exactly no time, and at a tenth of the rate it took to ship it, it was natural for people to use their service. Even he'd been awed when they first explained to him how the teleports operated by merely converting the matter into waves of energy and then transmitting through space to the teleport on the desired port-of-call where the energy was transformed back into the original matter. But the Teleport men, in their foppish maroon uniforms didn't have to think they owned the whole world, did they? They didn't have to go swaggering around, making cracks about the men who'd opened up the planets and the worlds beyond.

There'd always be need for men who could drive out into space in the big ships. Nobody'd ever built a teleport yet that could handle more than a ton at a transmittal, and no-

body would, according to what he'd heard. They didn't have to get laws passed making it mandatory to build heavy equipment in units small enough for the teleports.

Out on the field, a planetary ferry boat came roaring in, its big stacks spitting down flame, for a sloppy landing. They still used them for short run loads, where it was cheaper to ship full assemblies and pilings, logs, and similar material as they were, rather than cutting to fit the teleports.

And by Harry, the same held true for interstellar shipping—or would be true, if Teleport didn't take a loss in disassembling and reassembling, just to make sure it had no competition. Josh could still take a load of green *felikka* timber out past Deneb for less than Teleport could handle it, if they'd be honest about it. He had done it before, and he'd do it again—if he could find a shipper with guts enough to risk it, minus insurance.

But now that Teleport had managed to get control of the old interstellar insurance companies, and refused to insure the star ships against loss....

The dust sent up little whorls as his feet went out across the field toward the *Titwillow*. The big ship drew nearer, and Josh let his glance go over her again. Eight hundred feet up, she thrust her nose against the sky, a bit squat and wide for beauty, scarred by the ion streams of space, but the best darned ship that ever grew space legs. Twenty years he'd worked and traded and fought his way up until she was his. And now twenty years she'd been home and wife and mother to him. She lay there waiting, her nose pointed to the stars—and her holds empty.

Pete McIntosh came out from her, a wizened, gnarled little scotsman, sucking at a pipe that had been unfilled for as long as Josh could remember. The engineer stopped, studying Josh.

"How's it?" he asked.

Josh shrugged tiredly. "No cargo in Marsport—unless we want to ferry

mikkla roots back to earth! How about overhaul? Did you see the Gannet brothers?"

"Saw 'em," McIntosh nodded. "They're loaded up with work for Teleport, making housings. Josh, there ain't a machine-shop on Mars that can handle the retubing for the *Titwillow*. Gannets told me so, and they oughta know. What we gonna do now?"

"Ship back the *mikkla* roots!"

McIntosh stared dumbly at him, and he nodded. They'd lose money on the deal—they weren't equipped for the quick loading and unloading that made planetary ferry work pay off slightly. "Gotta, Pete. Only way we can get clearance into Dock City on earth is with a load—and we gotta retube the *Titwillow*. Besides, once we get earthside, there's bound to be cargo!"

Pete nodded again, doubtfully, but Josh chose not to see it. There had to be cargo. Earth was the center of the Solar trade. And at Dock City, the finest shops in the system would be available.

"Get set to take on *mikkla*. We blast off as soon as it's aboard."

BUT IT was a week later before the final clearance was through, and the *Titwillow* rose upwards on a shaky pair of legs. The tubes were misfiring, as they had done for the past year, and the huge roots had been stowed away sloppily, leaving a list to the starboard that Josh could barely overcome with the side rockets. He fought her, as he'd been fighting her since the tube trouble began, but she went up. And Mars dropped behind. Finally, Josh reached out for the lever and cut overdrive in.

The automatic threw it out at once, seemingly, but now Earth lay a bare four thousand miles below. The few million miles of planetary distance meant nothing to a ship on overdrive, capable of cutting through all the space between the suns like a train passing telegraph poles. From below, the speaker sent up Pete's whistle, but Josh ignored it. So overdrive wasn't meant to be used be-

tween planets; he was in a hurry.

He sent down inquiring signals, and the automatic radar on Earth gave a routine answer, directing him in. It was a formality now, though there had been a time when the starships had had to wait outside in orbits until there was room for them to land. He threw on the tubes, muttering as the growl came through the hull from misfiring; the *Titwillow* couldn't take much more in her condition, with the badly loaded *mikkla* roots adding to the strain.

Josh reached for the vernier on his timer, breathing on it gently, and hit the overdrive again. From below, a savage groan and stream of curses came up, and he could hear Pete's feet hit the corridor. Then Dock City slapped onto the screens, less than half a mile below, and the *Titwillow* was coming down on her tail, sliding over toward the edge of the field.

For a second, Josh let his eyes turn to the engineer, frozen in the door to the control room, perspiration oozing from his forehead. "You run the engines, Pete. I'll pilot."

Pete stared incredulously at the screen, watching as the ground came up, biting at the broken stem of his pipe. Outside, the whine of the stacks rose to a roar as they touched surface, and then the *Titwillow* was down, and the rockets cut off.

Josh's legs might have been a bit unsteady as he sank back into his chair, but he grinned. "Overdrive can be used that way, Pete...when it has to be. It beats burning out a tube." He pointed to the indicator that was flashing crimson on the board. "Number two passed critical limits on the takeoff. Until we get new tubing, we're grounded."

The Scotsman wiped off the sweat, stared out through the port at the ground that lay below, and nodded, "If we get retubing."

"We'll get it—we have to. This is Earth."

It was Earth, all right. The trucks had hardly started pulling out the *mikkla* before the jeep drew up, and a thin, sallow man came up the ramp, glanced at Josh's cap, and

pointed to the ship.

"Own her? Good. I'll give you fifty-five thousand, move her myself."

Josh shook his head and cocked his eyebrows, trying to make sense out of it. "You trying to buy the *Titwillow*?"

"What else?"

"Not for sale. And she's worth twenty times that."

"Not for scrap, she isn't!" The man's eyes were appraising, hard, and a little amused. "Look, I get 'em all; sooner or later, they all come back here, them as can make it. Once, we used parts of some to fix others, and they were worth more. Now...well, far as I know, you've got the last one out. And brother, does she need scrapping? You can't tell me you made that last jump on overdrive to show off—I could smell tube-fusing as I came within a mile of her. Top price, take it or leave it. She's no good for planetary ferry work."

YEAH, IT was Earth, Josh thought; out on the worlds beyond Sol, they still felt some awe of the big ships that had made the starways possible. But here, business was business.

"You got any tubes that are in A-1 condition?" he asked quietly, but some of the urgency in his mind must have come through. The other looked at him, and the amusement increased.

"Sure—for a price. I've got a whole set in original packing out on the scrap-pile. You can have 'em for fifty bucks apiece...if you want, you can have a dozen of 'em at that price. But if you want 'em put in for you...well, that's something else. Oh, we can do it—Acme Scrap used to be Acme Refitting. But we'd have to reassemble the shops, and do half of it by hand labor now. Fifty thousand to reline her, or I'll pay fifty-five thousand for her scrap. Better sell now, before the price goes down."

Josh considered his knuckles, and decided the guy would still be amused if he did take a good swing at the thin jaw. Besides, it might

be only more time wasted. He forced a grin onto his face. "I'll give you thirty-thousand for the job."

Surprisingly, that wiped out the amusement.

"You kidding? By God, you're not! You really want her retubed." He was suddenly business-like. "Cash in advance. And it'll cost you forty-thousand."

"Thirty-two—and that's tops."

"Ummm. If this weren't the slack season...okay, you've got a deal, old timer, if you've got the cash. Come over to the office this afternoon and we'll draw up the papers. In fact, come on now, and we'll split a drink on it."

Without the condescending amusement, some of the hardness also went, and Josh forgot his resentment of the man. But he shook his head, nodding down to the unloading that still had to be overseen.

The other nodded. "This afternoon then, Captain Ames. And my name's Acme—John Acme, and it's not a phoney. Maybe it's because we have the same initials I'm being soft about the price—I won't make much on the deal. But, hang it, I never thought I'd have such a job again, and it'll make a good story to tell the kids. Where'd you get the money, anyhow?"

"Gambling," Josh told him truthfully, neglecting to mention that it had been thirty years before when he'd gambled on being able to get close enough to a sun to rescue a millionaire party. And it was the last of the money—once it was gone, he'd be flat broke, without money for fuel for take-off. "How come you get the ships for scrap when there are tubes still around?"

Ames stared at him doubtfully. "What good are starships, with or without tubes, when there's no work for 'em? Well, see you."

He went down the ramp again, leaving Josh rolling another cigarette. But the old captain's hands were trembling.

"There's got to be cargo," he said slowly. "There always was cargo."

Behind him, Pete McIntosh sucked

at another dry pipe. "Sure, Josh. Sure."

Across the field, the big pile of scrap that had once been starships looked back at them. Josh tossed aside his ruined cigarette and began another. "There's cargo," he repeated. "There has to be cargo."

BUT TWO weeks later, Josh Ames sat on a plastileather seat in a room that glistened with chrome and plastic trim, staring at a blank panel. His fingers fumbled for a cigarette before he realized what he was doing; then he reached for the makings, considered the lack of ash-trays, and gave it up.

The space office had changed while he was out in the deeps, and was now only a corner of the Planet Ferry Command—and located in a small part of Teleport, Inc., at that, to make it worse. Once it had been a building of its own, reserved for deep-spacemen. And in those days there had been a bulletin board, listing cargoes, while a busy group of clerks took down quotations and allocated jobs, helped make routings, and arranged for loading.

Now three old men sat in other seats, taking advantage of the honorary right to use it as a sort of club-room, and there was dust on the closed window where someone should have answered about cargoes. The only life was a sweeper who came through, making desultory efforts to find enough work to keep him out of the way of some supervisor who might give him a real job. But from outside, the busy sounds of the normal routine of Teleport came seeping in.

Josh stirred, wondering when the girl would let him see someone in authority. Finally, he gave up, and reached for his tobacco.

Doubtful feet sounded beside him, and he glanced up to see a stooped man with a grizzled beard staring at him. For a second, the deep-space tan on the other's face held his eyes, and then he began to pierce through the beard.

"Ed Boyles!" Josh came to his feet, his hand out. They'd graduated

from the same space academy, same class. Ed had come from a family with money, and had managed to get himself a starship of his own right after graduation, while Josh sweated out his own luck, but that hadn't mattered then, any more than the obvious patches on Boyle's jacket mattered now.

"Hi, Josh. Thought it was you. Figured I might find somebody here I knew. Hey, tobacco! Where'd you get it?"

"Grow it on the *Titwillow*."

"You mean..." Puzzlement came onto the other's face. "That's right, I did see 'em retubing a starship. Meant to go over, see what one, but—well, I dunno. Still running?"

Josh nodded, holding out a light while Ed finished his rolling. "Still running, good for forty more years now, with new tubes. All I need... what you doing?"

"Oiler on a planet ferry. Just got sacked. Too old."

"Oh." There wasn't much else to say. Josh had seen the name of Ed's *Mary Jane* on a piece of scrap in Acme's pile, and he knew that there was no use asking after the ship. Acme had apparently told the truth—all the other starships had apparently been scrapped or lost. "Want a job, potluck, as second on the *Titwillow*?"

For a second, Ed seemed to hesitate. Then his face split into a grin. "Tell you the truth, Josh, that's why I came here, hoping I'd find you; your engineer said you'd come here. I went out there to see the ship—I lied to you a little, maybe—and then I figured...."

They let it rest at that while they smoked. Then Ed stirred. "How'd you do it, Josh? I spent three solid years here, waiting for a cargo while the field rent ate up every cent I had, before I let the *Mary Jane* go—and her tubes were getting old, too. You must be better connected."

"I had enough business to keep going," Josh answered slowly. There was no use telling the other about the long, lean hops between stars the last few years, out on the periphery. "I'm waiting for cargo now."

Boyles nodded, still puzzled, but Josh let it go. He had to get cargo—and since there were no other ships, he could ask what he would, practically. Maybe there wasn't much work—but there had to be some. Teleport wouldn't bother undercutting just to keep one single starship off the lanes.

Then the girl came, picking her way daintily past the sleeping older men. "You can come in now, Mr. Ames."

IT WASN'T even "Captain Ames" now, it seemed. But Josh shrugged, and got up to follow her, motioning Ed Boyles to follow. Well, it had taken two weeks of waiting, but at least there was something doing finally. Now, even if it was a light cargo, he'd have enough to refuel and get off the planet—and they'd know here where the picking was best, so he could go next where they'd have work waiting for him.

He followed out of the little room, down the halls, and into the main shipping center of Teleport. The girl led him past the main offices, through narrowing corridors, and finally into a little office where a lean young man with troubled eyes and a look that would have made a starship man of him once nodded awkwardly.

"Captain Ames, starship *Titwillow*?"

Josh flipped over his identity cards, and the young man ran through them, not seeming to bother reading them.

Finally he cleared his throat. "As you know, Captain Ames, Teleport has taken over the former Space Office. Normally, we don't operate it as a functioning thing, but... well, I've been able to do some investigating for you. We like to observe the courtesies. After all, your ship and Teleport are the only ones left in the business, and we might as well be friendly rivals."

He tried a small laugh, but it didn't come off well. Josh frowned. "And besides, your charter in taking over Space Office says you're re-

sponsible for clearing cargo for starships, and your Teleport charter on the periphery depends on your having a Space Office. I looked it up."

"Yeah." The man laughed again, more heartily this time. "Okay, Captain Ames. You're right—we're compelled to route you if we can find cargo. And confidentially, we'd be happier if we could keep a starship operating, at least until the right bills can be put through World Parliament to get around the old monopoly claim. If we found a shipper, you'd get the business. But..."

Josh waited. "Well?"

"There's no business to be had. No shipper will take the risk without insurance, particularly when it takes weeks to deliver, and we can teleport there in no time—literally. Even if Teleport were to subsidize you, we couldn't get the business for you. Toward the last, too many ships cracked up."

"But I've got new tubes installed."

"And you were observed making a planet landing practically on overdrive. It made a nice story for the papers—but it isn't the sort of thing that will make shippers want you carrying for them. There's just no work to be had for you."

Josh looked at the man slowly, trying to read duplicity into his face, but it wouldn't wash. The boy was sincere enough—and on his desk were a group of memos, with enough of their contents showing to prove that he'd been working at it.

"That's all?"

"That's all, Captain Ames. Teleport can't help you, I'm afraid. However, if you'd like to sell the *Titwillow*, we might get you a better price than normally offered for scrap. No? No, I suppose not. Well, you might call me in a week. I'll keep trying. Just ask for Mr. Dikter."

BOYLES started to cut off as they came near the field, but Josh pulled him back. "There's still food in the galley, Ed. And if Teleport won't get me cargo, I'll get my own."

But he couldn't even make himself

believe it now. The boy had been the wrong sort to stall him off. If it had been one of the usual office flunkies, he might have called it cheap politics, but Dikter hadn't been fooling.

He kept most of the thoughts from his mind as he went across the field, rounding past the squat tubs that were loading with cargo for Venus and Io, carrying fertilizer that was too odorous for Teleport to handle without first processing it to kill the smell. He watched the sloppy uniforms around the tubs, and shook his head. The men manning the ferries wouldn't have been allowed aboard a fuel tender, in the old days. Now, this was all that was left.

Then they hit toward the open end of the field, and toward the sheds where Acme Scrap had finally finished with the retubing of the *Titwillow*. She stood there, showing up against the dulling red of late sunset. The last of the machines Acme had used were pulled away now, and the clean polish of the tube brazings stood out sharply against the rest of her pitted hull. Acme might have been high handed at first, but he'd done a good job; Josh had no complaint on that score. The *Titwillow* was good for decades now—or would be, with her holds filled and starlandings to make.

Boyles sighed beside him, accepting the makings for another cigarette silently. Then they reached the ramp, and stopped by common consent, looking out over the big deserted field.

"I hear they're planning on moving the ferry service out further, gonna turn this into a big park," Boyles said finally.

Josh nodded and turned back toward the entrance, just as a shout came up from below. John Acme was down there, inspecting the job on the tubes, and they went down.

"Satisfied? But I don't have to ask that. Never did a prettier job, even when Dad was running this as a repair center. When you moving her out, Ames?"

"Pretty soon," Josh answered. "Yeah, as soon as..."

But he couldn't even say it. Acme waited, then shrugged. "It'll have to be soon, Ames. According to the old contract form we used, you've got the right to stay here three days after repairs are finished, and I guess I can stretch it a couple days. But next week, I've got a bunch of heavy trucks coming in to deliver scrap, and I'll need every bit of this for the cranes. If you find a cargo by then, I'll even let you load—but I can't stretch it further."

"Yeah." Josh tried to think of something to say and failed. Finally he gave up. "Okay, Mr. Acme."

Acme hesitated a moment longer, then shrugged, and went back to his office. Boyles was standing back by the ramp, acting as if he had heard nothing, and Pete McIntosh was talking to him. From Pete's face, it was obvious that the engineer must have learned the news from Boyles.

"Supper's on, Josh," McIntosh broke the silence. "There's enough for Ed, too."

THEY WENT up together, none of them looking too carefully about as they headed into the living quarters. It had been ten years since Ed Boyles had come aboard the *Titwillow*, out around Rigel, when his *Mary Jane* had docked alongside. Then there had been a regular crew, and a cook, even. The decks had been clean, and the bright work had sparkled. She was still a clean ship—she always would be, with Josh running her—but the last five years, while Josh and Pete had learned to run her alone, had taken their toll in appearance.

"How much does it cost at the official Dock?" Josh asked Ed at last. "They got space enough now, and with no business, no attendants, it ought to be cheap."

"City ordinance still stands. When you dock, they have to dig up some bum to dummy as an attendant. Rates are still a thousand a week, two fifty a day, just to lie to. By the way, did I ever tell you what happened in New Irkutsk?"

Josh listened dutifully, but his mind went on clicking along in the same rut, in spite of Ed's attempt to change the subject. He had exactly one hundred and seventy three dollars left—not enough for dock service for a single day. And there was barely enough fuel left in the tanks to lift the *Titwillow* into new space, even if it cost nothing.

But it would lift her—and once she got up, the overdrive could operate. There was still fuel enough for that. They might not be able to land again, but the old *Titwillow* could head out into deep space. Food enough, or there should be. They'd stocked up on that when the shipper out around Antares had gone broke and been unable to pay freightage.

He considered it slowly, letting the decision sink in. And finally he knew there was no other way. He'd never questioned the traditions of Space Office, and he didn't intend to change now; a man didn't junk a good ship, no matter what the others might have done.

But first, he'd have to get Ed and Pete out on some pretext. It would be tough, taking off without someone in the engine-room, but it could be done, he guessed.

Then, as he relaxed, he heard the call from outside. Pete had heard it, too, and was already throwing the ramp down, for John Acme to come up, puffing a little.

"Dikter, of Teleport, on the phone in the office," he announced. "He says tell you he's got you a job."

Life came back into Josh's legs, and he was down the ramp before Pete's sudden yell could be echoed by Ed Boyles, and across the little strip of field. He spotted the phone in the office, and grabbed it to him, staring at the panel where Dikter's grinning face was looking out. "You wanted me?"

"I sure did, Captain Ames." The boy was beaming now. "I've got it—the obvious—so blamed obvious I never even thought of it, though I knew vaguely that there was supposed to be another starship operating. How'd you like to have a life-

time charter—and at good rates? With just one catch?"

Josh sat down slowly, as Acme came back into the office, and began reaching for the makings. "Okay, son, let's have it. What's the catch?"

"That you take me along. I'm sick of office work—and Dad was a starship Captain once."

He waited for Josh's nod, and began giving details. Acme listened in for a moment, and held out a congratulatory hand. The man's smile was still amused, but it seemed sincere enough now.

THEY BEGAN loading in the morning, first the bright trucks with fuel, running their hoses up and shooting a stream into the empty belly of the waiting *Titwillow*. Then Dikter came, a boy in working clothes, somehow gangling and awkward in this new job he'd elbowed his way into.

"All right, kid, now tell us what the devil we're carrying?"

That was the one thing that the boy had refused to tell, though the rest of the deal had been above-board enough. The charter was direct from Teleport, Inc., paying a flat fee per month for charter, over and above the cost of all supplies. It was something that Josh had known once, complete charter.

Dikter shook his head. "Does it matter?"

Then the trucks began arriving with the big crates, all stamped with the seal of Teleport, and Josh looked for evidence of what they contained. But they were not uniform, and there was no way to telling what was inside.

"No," he decided. "No, maybe not. I've carried cargoes before without knowing that."

But he'd liked some cargoes less than others, he thought to himself. And the kid hadn't been too smart. The two men that were to go along with the cargo as supercargo meant that it was something special. If the government, or whoever was backing this, wanted to play it that way, it was their business.

"Hell," he decided. "It gets car-

ried, that's enough. Right now, I'd even be willing to think about shipping teleports..."

The gasp from Dikter wasn't necessary, then. It should have been obvious, as the kid had said. No matter what the Teleport Company officials claimed, there was one cargo they could never transport. The first teleport on any planet had to be carried there by ship. There'd been a time when Teleport had tried vainly to get the starships to do it for them, and finally had to build their own ship. Now—well, if they needed a second ship to spread from planet to planet fast enough, he wouldn't be cutting the throat of other shipowners or destroying trade by spreading the machines for them. There were no more shipowners and there was no trade to be destroyed.

"Well, we'd better get below and supervise stowage," he said slowly. "We've got cargo coming aboard.

And on the *Titwillow*, when we head for deep space, we stow it right! I've never lost or damaged a cargo, and I don't intend to start now. Mr. Boyles, you're in charge. Mr. McIntosh, Mr. Dikter, you take orders from Mr. Boyles. And step lively, sirs!"

Then he chuckled, wryly at first, but with more spirit after a moment. The joke was on Teleport, Inc., after all. They had spent years driving the starships out, but they'd lost. And they'd always lose.

As long as there were new planets, there'd always be starships. And that meant there'd always be room for a good deep-spaceman. Maybe the service was a little smaller...but it wasn't licked yet. And it never could be.

He tossed aside the factory-produced cigarette and reached for his makings, before heading down to see that the stowage was going as it should.

The Editors
of Marvel
Speak . . .



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—THE EDITORS

FORBIDDEN WEAPON

Yes, Aurora was doomed, and within two weeks the warriors of Valkyr would have sown salt over the ruins of Astraris. But golden-haired Janessa knew that the men who attacked the star-king were no Aurorans but men from space, and that only one thing could save her now from being turned into a she-wolf and the whole galaxy from ravishment — the Navigators' resorting to the forbidden weapon!



WHAT WORLDS WOULD DIE, AND WHEN? ONLY SCIENCE, THE DESTROYER, KNEW THE ANSWER!



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CHAPTER I

FOR MANY hours Kevin the Navigator had driven his open ground car along the sea-cliff wall, but now its fuel was nearly exhausted. The rain that had turned

his black cape and tunic into a sodden ruin, sluiced off his steel cap and oiled mail shirt and soaked through to chill the bare flesh beneath. Behind, the sounds of the pursuing ground car grew louder—and with an oath Kevin realized that

by **ALFRED COPPEL**



Janessa pulled the dagger and leaped for Hulse —

the men who had followed him from the spaceport were gaining.

Turning his head Kevin could see their car clearly on the palisades. When his fuel ran out they would overtake him and cut him off from Melissande. The light was fading, but there would still be a long gray time before nightfall and Kevin could not hope to evade them until dark. The young soldier-priest's hand sought the worn rubber haft of his flail in an unconscious gesture of defiance.

The solid reality of the weapon brought a grim comfort. This, at least, was simple and elemental. Long range weapons had been outlawed, of course, but the electric flail was a deadly weapon at close quarters, and it could be thrown. The cape and the rubber haft protected you, and the metal ball and chain could kill.

He must fight. And he must win or die. This was something momentarily apart from the soul-shaking confusions he had faced of late.

Like fragments of colored glass in a kaleidoscope, the events of the last weeks flashed through Kevin's mind. He saw again the strained face of the Navigator Superior on the day he had left the Cloister in Algol. He felt the stab of pain he had felt the day he had been told of the treachery on Aurora, and of his father's mortal wounds.

"Kreon, the Warlord, lies dying at Melissande..."

The words sounded hollow and strange. Stranger yet was the thought that his brother lay in chains somewhere. Karston the Proud—in chains. He had hardly known his brother, but dimly he remembered Karston as a tall, strong, proud man—a born leader of men. An ambitious man who could be cruel or kind as the circumstances demanded. His brother in chains...

It all had a dream-like quality of unreality to Kevin. The structure of his life had crumbled about him in the space of an hour, and now he was faced with building another sort of life out of a savage and confused nothingness. No longer could he think of a life devoted to the an-

cient mysteries of the Navigators. With Karston captured and Kreon dying, the coronet of star-king was his, and with it the leadership of an ancient and warlike people.

His engine sputtered once and then again, and the car coasted to a stop. The sudden movement brought Kevin back to present reality. There was little sense in worrying about his future life, he thought bleakly, while those two behind him followed. Glancing back through the wet twilight, he could see that his pursuers were seeking to force him downward onto a narrow shelf high above the darkling sea.

WITH QUICK decision, The Navigator decided not to attempt running their gauntlet. The narrow shelf suited him as well as it suited them. There, at least, he could force them to fight out of their car. He climbed out of his own car and headed toward the shelf, loosening his flail and ancestral dagger in their sheaths.

For an instant, Kevin wondered if these two could be Aurorans, and then chided himself for entertaining a foolish thought. With the whole planet of Valkyr up in arms, no Auroran could possibly pass the Identifiers that guarded every spaceport in the known galaxy. The Navigators themselves maintained the machines for the preservation of a precarious peace among the warlike worlds of the Edge.

No, these were either highwaymen, or—Kevin frowned—or assassins hired by someone who had known that his haste to be at Kreon's side would separate him from the escort of captains Hulse had sent to bring him to Melissande.

Perhaps, thought Kevin suddenly, this was not as simple as it had at first appeared. His pursuers must have seen his black cane and its golden Spaceship and Flail blazon. They knew then that he was a Navigator and carried nothing of value but his weapons. Plain robbery, therefore, was an unlikely motive. And he had spent the last ten of his

twenty-five years in and around Al-gol, where the Cloister of the Navigators lay. He could have no *personal* enemies on his native planet. He was almost a stranger to Valkyr....

Moving swiftly now, Kevin retreated to the very edge of the shelf. Underfoot, the sparse tundra was slick with the rain. Behind him a sheer drop of a hundred feet ended among the churning breakers of the sea. The wind was rising now, driving the cold rain before it like a lash. Kevin unclasped his cape and wound it around his dagger arm. Then he drew his weapons and waited.

CHAPTER II

THE CASTLE of Melissande straddled a rocky point jutting like a sword into the sea. The topmost towers were lost, as evening fell, amid the racing scud clouds that churned black and forbidding across the barren shoreline. The pennons and banners that showed the presence there of both the Warlord and the Lord Hulse whipped in the rising gale, heavy with rain.

On the crenelated battlements, amid the rusted ruins of ancient and forgotten war-machines, the guards sought shelter against the storm. Their flails gleamed fitfully in the light of the sputtering flambeaux as they stood about in groups and conversed in low tones.

There was a pall of gloom on the great steel and stone citadel. In a bare room in the north tower, surrounded by helpless physicians and warlocks, the star-king lay dying.

Far below, in a small chamber beneath the crashing waves that battered at the impregnable curtain-walls, two men sat before a bare table. One, a tall, commanding figure wearing the metal harness of a Valkyr warrior, fondled a dagger. The light of the single lamp struck shards of fire from the gems in the pommel. The other man was a hooded dwarfish thing with the sallow complexion and steely eyes of an android. He was speaking in a harsh, resonant whisper.

"...but my master grows impatient, Hulse. Valkyr is to be the last, as you well know. The others have wasted their substance and the Dead world is ready to strike. The *Atomics* are assembled and the Imperial City is under surveillance. Only Valkyr remains and Kreon must die! Why had he not died?"

Hulse stretched his long legs with a sigh and smiled disdainfully at the android. "Patience. Patience, my dear Rog. You forget that I, of all people, should know your... ah... master's plans. Kreon will die. Even now he's sinking fast." The handsome face was suddenly distorted by a frown. "If you had done your job properly at the feast on Aurora, Kreon would have died there and I would not have had to bring him back here at all. Remember that. However." He shrugged and sheathed the dagger, "it matters little. I have Janessa here a prisoner and that in itself should be enough to force Aurora to fight."

The android pulled his cloak tighter around himself, as though chilled by the dankness of the stone room. "How soon? It must be soon. Remember that when Kevin arrives, you will have the Navigators to deal with, and they have always had access to the forbidden weapons. We must strike the Imperium quickly if we are to succeed."

"Kevin will not arrive," declared Hulse flatly.

Something like the parody of a smile touched the android's thin lips. "I see. You have attended to that."

Lord Hulse arose as though to signal that the interview was over. "I have attended to everything," he said coldly. "Tell him that. Aurora and Valkyr will be at war within the week. Kreon will be dead within the hour, and Kevin the Navigator will not arrive to interfere with our plans." He stepped to the door and touched the lock. It opened with a click. "Kindly remember that I have had something to do with the plans, Rog, and do not presume to think that you—an *android*—are closer to our master than I."

The android paled slightly at the

insult but remained silent.

"Tell him that I want Janessa for myself. He should have no objections to that. When the crown of Imperator is his, he will have the galaxy to choose from."

The android nodded sullenly and got to his feet.

"Now go," ordered Hulse, "and take care that you are not seen. Your ship is at the south postern. Take care that you are not seen blasting off, either. A strange spaceship is cause for comment on Valkyr."

The android glared up at the tall Valkyr. "I was not seen coming, nor will I be seen going. I am not a fool, Hulse. Take care that you may always say the same." Then he was gone down the dark passageway and the Lord Hulse stood alone, smiling into the dim room.

AVOIDING the most travelled hallways of the castle, Hulse made his way to his own quarters. Once there, he called for his orderly. The warrior entered and saluted.

"Is there news of the Warlord?" asked Hulse.

"None, sir. But the warlock Malthus mutters of poisoning." The young warrior's face darkened with anger. "If it is so, that Auroran she-wolf will pay..."

"Malthus is a fool," said Hulse shortly. "The Warlord was severely wounded. The Aurorans had no need to poison him—and they will suffer for their treachery." He paused thoughtfully. "Bring the Princess of Aurora to me here."

"At once, my lord." The warrior saluted and withdrew. Hulse kindled the fire laid in the huge grate. He sat fondling his dagger as the flames leaped high.

Presently the orderly returned, leading a chained young woman. Hulse ordered him out with a gesture and sat staring thoughtfully at the tattered figure standing proudly before him.

"Well, Janessa? Have you changed your mind? Do you wish my help now?"

Janessa of Aurora did not reply. The firelight played on her tumbled hair and etched the curves of her

body into Hulse's memory. He would always remember her like this now, he thought with satisfaction. Helpless and completely his—if and when he chose to take her.

"You know, of course, that Aurora is doomed. Within two weeks at the outside, the warriors of Valkyr will have sown salt over the ruins of Astraris. Then you will be Princess of Nothing. Only I can help you."

"I want nothing from you, Hulse," said the girl with an effort, "Except the truth."

"Truth? What is truth?" Hulse spread his hands ingenuously.

"Tell your people that the men who attacked Karston and Kreon at our betrothal feast were no Aurorans, but men from space! Tell all Valkyr that my people had no part in such treachery!" Janessa's voice seemed near the breaking point. "There has been peace between Aurora and Valkyr since Kieron the Warlord's time. We did not stab our friends in the back! We had no reason—"

Hulse shook his head sadly. "No, Janessa, I cannot tell the men of Valkyr that. Their star-king is dying; your own betrothed—prince Karston—is gone. They must have vengeance for that. Aurora will die."

Quite suddenly Janessa was blazing. She leapt forward, brandishing her manacles like a weapon, slashing at Hulse with white-hot fury. One link caught him across the cheek, laying it open to the bone. With a sweeping blow he knocked the girl sprawling to the flagstones and stood over her, breath coming hard, hand to his cheek.

"You vixen!" he muttered. "I could have you stripped naked and given to the guardsmen for that!"

"Do what you like, swine!" cried the girl. "You know that both I and my people are guiltless and yet you call for war..." Her eyes glittered feral hate. "I warn you, Hulse, you had better kill me. For by the Gods of Science, and the Great Destroyer himself, I shall kill you if you don't!"

Hulse reached down and lifted her to him by a harness strap. He was

smiling suddenly and he pulled her tight against him.

"In time, Janessa, you will learn better. In time." He kissed her full on the mouth and she twisted away from him, wiping her lips as though something unclean had touched her.

Janessa's voice was low and steady, "I warn you once more, Hulse. Stay away from me. Stay away from me...."

Hulse bowed formally and called for his orderly. There was a mocking insolence in his eyes as he watched the captive led away.

When the orderly returned Hulse was again before the fire caressing the dagger in his hands.

"The captains have arrived, Lord Hulse," said the young warrior worriedly. "And Prince Kevin is not with them...."

Hulse's eyebrows arched upward. "Indeed?" He arose languorously and called for his weapons. "We must meet with them and learn what has happened to keep the Prince Navigator from his liege father's death-bed. It might be something....unforeseen."

CHAPTER III

WITH his back to the sea, Kevin stood waiting for his assailants. He watched them close in on him, walking cautiously on the slippery path. As they reached the inland edge of the narrow rock-shelf they saw that Kevin waited for them with his weapons ready and this gave them pause, for everyone knew that the soldier-priests were excellent fighters.

Kevin watched them clearly. From his vantage point at the edge of the shelf he could see clearly that they wore no indentifying metal, and though this was to be expected in hired assassins or robbers, he felt disappointed. Each man carried a flail and a dagger and wore mail and a cape as was the custom among the Valkyrs.

Their faces showed them to be peasants or androids. It was hard to tell in the failing light. In the last

quarter century, androids had mixed freely with the population of most of the inhabited galaxy and there were even reports of children being born of robo-human unions. For the most part however, androids were recognizable by their short, stocky build and their sallow complexions. Kevin found himself hoping fervently that these two might be androids, for the artificial people lacked the muscular coordination to use their electric flails to best advantage.

Such was not the case, however. As the two began to inch forward, the Navigator could determine conclusively that they were both of human stock. He raised his flail and set his sandled feet more firmly in the slippery tundra-grass.

One of the attackers was whirling his flail overhead and Kevin watched him draw it back and take aim. The missile arced through the rain to meet the glittering circle of Kevin's own flail as he swept it aside. With a clash of sparks it went clattering among the rocks far below.

There was a whispered conversation between the two men, and then they charged him, one with up-raised flail and the other with his dagger ready.

Kevin met the first attacker's flail with his own, and they nullified each other like similar poles of a magnet, but the sudden movement had left him off balance and the second assassin's blade gashed his arm below the short mailed sleeve. The sharp pain of the wound lanced through him and he muttered an oath, thrusting at his first assailant with the ancient dagger which had been his grandfather's. The point punctured the man's cheek and he leaped back out of danger.

Kevin whirled to engage the second now, who was unbalanced by the force of his own charge. Twice the man parried the Navigator's head-blows, but the third stroke broke through his guard and flashed against his protective helmet, staggering him. The man fell and Kevin raised his flail to end the combat, but the other returned suddenly to

the attack. The Navigator turned to face him.

The strident clash of metal filled the twilight, and sparks flashed all about them, permeating the air with the strong odor of ozone. Kevin could feel his wounded arm stiffening. The assassin, heavier built than the Navigator, closed with him haft to haft; pressing him back toward the drop at his back. On the grass, the other man was stirring. Kevin let his assailant drive him back until he could release his dagger arm. Then with a sudden, vicious motion, he drove it upward under the man's mailed shirt.

THERE was a shrill scream of agony as the blade bit deep. Kevin could feel the hot blood gushing over his hand. The man straightened stiffly and pitched to the ground, his clawed fingers digging spasmodically into the wet tundra of the ledge.

Breath coming hard, the Navigator whirled to see the dead man's companion on his feet again, flail in hand. His eyes were still filmy from the force of the blow he had taken, but his courage had not failed him. He lowered his head and charged Kevin clumsily.

The Navigator did not swing. He wanted to take the man alive. It was important that he know what, if any, hidden motive there might be for this sneak attack; on a member of the Order. He evaded the charge easily enough, but the man moved past him, turning unsteadily on the very edge of the precipice. Kevin raised his flail hand as though to hold the assassin back. The movement was sudden and unconscious. It was also very like a feint. The stunned brigand raised his own weapon jerkily and stepped backward. The slippery tundra gave way under his weight. For just a fleeting instant Kevin saw him etched against the darkening sky, an expression of stupid disbelief on his face. And then he was gone. His long wailing cry breaking the sudden silence of the short, vicious battle.

For a long while Kevin stood on the ledge, the dead man at his feet.

It was quite dark now, and the wind howled mournfully around the figured pallisades of the sea cliff. The rain lashed his face, wetting his dry lips and stinging his cheeks.

Kevin knelt and searched the harness pouch of the dead man. In the light of his torch he inspected the assassin's meagre belongings. There was nothing of course, to identify him. Only a larger amount of money than would ordinarily be carried by a common warrior. Kevin stared at the coins. The platinum discs gleamed under the tiny light. Then, he thought heavily, it was true. Someone had hired these men to prevent his arrival at Melissande.

Kevin snapped off the torch and frowned into the darkness. Who had done this thing? And why? Who could have known that he would leave the escort Hulse had sent for behind in his haste? It would have to be someone who knew him well. Someone who knew his personal traits of impatience and disregard of custom. Only such a one would know that the traditionally slow and funereal pace set by the captains would gall him into precipitous action. And why? Why?

Kevin shook his head slowly. His thoughts still seemed clouded by the reaction of the combat. He needed time—and help.

There was Malthus, of course. Malthus had always been his father's favorite among the warlocks of the Valkyr court. It had been Malthus who had set Kevin's feet on the path to the Order of Navigators. Malthus could help him understand these things.

And Hulse. There was the Lord Hulse. Kevin had never liked him, but Hulse had been close to his father—Karston. A man who could serve the cold and arrogant Prince Karston—a man who could love him—could also be counted on in times of stress.

Suddenly weary, Kevin turned and made his way back up the trail to where his attackers' car waited. He gathered his cape about him against the icy touch of the rain and bound his wound with a scarf. Then

he climbed in and headed the carneighbors among the systems of the galactic Edge. Peace had been among them since the Imperatrix Alys had commissioned the great warrior Kieron of Valkyr to aid the dynasty of Aurora in their fight for liberty from the Antarean hordes. And that had been a century and more ago.

CHAPTER IV

THE DUNGEONS of Melissande were far beneath the surface of the sea and the drafts that moved through the damp corridors were thick with the smell of salt and nitre. Little could be heard under the water but the distant booming of the surf and very faintly the echoes of the mournful requiem for the dying star-king.

Janessa of Aurora huddled shivering against a seaward wall and listened. It seemed to her that the faint sounds of mourning that had so long filled her prison were changing in tone—becoming more agonized and poignant as Kreon sank deeper into the mistiness of death.

The narrow beam of light streaming through the barred grill in her cell door touched Janessa. Her golden hair was caked with prison filth and her full lips were compressed and blue against the cold. She still wore the remnants of her betrothal finery, but it was ripped and tattered beyond all recognition now. For days she had shivered in the dungeons of Melissande half naked and full of a shaking, grinding terror that only her pride dammed up within her.

It was hard for her to believe that all this was not a nightmare and that she would not awake once again in Astraris, safe and unafraid. But it was no dream. Hulac's touch was still upon her flesh and she remembered the burning insistence of his kiss with a mixture of shame, hate and panic.

She recalled only vaguely the attack on her betrothal feast. It had a many-faceted unreality that was confusing and grotesque. One minute she and her Regent had stood in the Great Hall of Astraris watching Kreon the Warlord and his elder son advancing down the serried rows of bowing courtiers—and the next—madness....

She had never loved Karston. She had known him, of course, for years, for Valkyr and Aurora were near

But Karston had never been to her liking. She had found him overly proud, arrogant, and ambitious beyond all reason. It was terrible to think of that prideful prince in chains among strangers. She did not see the irony of her concern for him while she lay like a slave in the pits of Melissande.

Yet when Kreon had asked her hand in marriage for his heir, neither she nor her Regent had hesitated. An alliance between two systems of the Edge, where the warrior strength of the galactic Imperium was concentrated, was a thing much to be sought for. Too many of the warrior worlds were weak and spent now after senseless and unexplainable wars. The power of the Imperatrix suffered and the lot of the trillions of people under her reigning hand suffered too.

Janessa suppressed a sob. Now there would be war again. This time between Aurora and Valkyr. Warriors and tillers of the soil would die together. Even the Navigators could not stop it. They could only fulfill their traditional role of custodians of the ancient spaceships—carrying men back and forth across the vast spaces of the Edge, now to death.

The shaft of light from the door of her cell widened suddenly, and Janessa sat blinking into the glare. A robed figure was standing in the frame of brightness. It was the star-king's warlock, Malthus.

Janessa did not rise. Suddenly, all Valkyrs had become enemies, and the once kindly Malthus was not likely to be an exception. Kreon was dying, and Malthus existed on the star-king's bounty.

THE LIGHT behind the old warlock gave his white hair and beard the look of a nimbus surrounding his face. Janessa thought sudden-

ly of the solideographs she had seen of the old saints of the First Empire. In that misty, golden-age men of good will had lived to fight the evil power of the Atom Gods and the Great Destroyer Science. They had fought with the only weapons they had possessed—courage and benevolence—but they had failed and the Galactic Wars had swept like plague across the heavens bringing the savagery and wanton of ignorance of the Interregnum.

Malthus advanced into the dim cell and motioned the guards away. When they were alone together, he bowed to Janessa formally.

The Princess of Aurora suppressed a sudden wild impulse to laugh at the sight of the great warlock Malthus of Valkyr bowing to a chained and filthy girl in the pits of his lord's keep. She bit down hard on her lip and got to her feet unsteadily. The days of close confinement were beginning to tell on her. She could feel hysteria like a hot ball in the pit of her stomach.

"My lady, be of good cheer," said the warlock in his oddly accented speech. "Your ill fortune will not long continue."

Janessa caught her breath. For the first time since the precipitous retreat of the Valkyrs from Aurora, a kind word had been spoken to her. And from a warlock whose knowledge of the occult was said to approach that of the Order of Navigators itself.

Almost timidly, she extended a grimy hand. "You...you have news, Malthus? Does Kreon fare better?"

The warlock shook his head sadly. "Kreon dies, lady. And when he is gone I may expect to join you here, for Hulse has no love for me. But it will not last for long. Kevin comes."

Kevin. To Janessa the name conjured up a memory of a dark-eyed boy of ten stepping aboard a spaceship surrounded by caped Navigators. The picture was dimmed with years and half-obscured by the glittering figure of Karston the Proud. "Kevin," she spoke the name softly. "A boy..."

The warlock took her hand and shook his head. "No, lady. A man.

A prince of Valkyr and..." He pronounced the word reverently: "...a Navigator."

Janessa automatically made the sign of the flail on her breast. She thought of the Order of Navigators almost fearfully, for the people of Aurora were devout. But there were questions, and she felt that she must ask them, for her only hope and the hope of her people rested with...a Navigator.

The warlock seemed to divine her thoughts. "The Order is revered, lady," he said ruefully, "And not understood. It is the fault of our savage times."

"They are powerful?" she asked hopefully.

Malthus shrugged. "They own the sharpest dagger. Knowledge."

"Can they help...my people?" breathed Janessa fearfully, "Hulse blames Aurora for the attack that befell the feast. He calls the lords of Valkyr to battle against my people—seeking vengeance for Karston and Kreon." Tears started unbidden. "By the Gods of Space, Malthus, it was not Aurorans that attacked Astraris that awful night! It was men from space! Unknown men..."

"Men armed with the forbidden weapons, Janessa," said the warlock harshly, "I was there. *The forbidden weapons...Atomics!*"

Janessa gasped at the hideous word. She felt her heart contract.

"Atomics," said Malthus pitilessly, "the Great Destroyer is once again loose in the galaxy!"

JANESSA sank to the bare bench that lined the stone wall. The terror that stalked every human being in the inhabited galaxy raged suddenly in her breast. Fear, like a black shadow, swooped down out of the night to possess her.

"Gods of Space, who can save us now?" she whispered.

Malthus sat down beside her and spoke in low tones.

"Long ago, lady, before this Imperium rose from the ashes of the dark ages, there lived another, greater Empire. A thousand star-kings formed the inner council and the

Emperors were masters of all the known universe. It was then that the spaceships were built, for these men were like gods. Science was king and miracles were cheap."

"But war came. Again and again. It swept across the sky like fire, and the whole universe trembled under the steel fist of the atom gods. Man went mad and science became the Great Destroyer. The great Empire fell, and falling, sowed madness and savagery among the survivors of the cataclysm...the dark ages of the Interregnum came.

"But not all knowledge perished. The spaceships remained intact, for they were eternal. And the men who guided them among the stars joined together into an Order. The Order of Navigators. They—and a few scattered witches and warlocks—clung to the old knowledge. Not all, for much was lost in the madness of the Great Destroyer. But much did remain. Atomic weapons remained...."

Janessa shuddered again at the awful word.

"Then came the slow and painful dawn of a new age. A fierce age. A time of strife and pain. An age of Iron. Gilmer, the Great Imperator was born. Under his strong rule the Galactic Imperium was reborn—but reborn as a loose confederation of star systems. This he did with fire and flail, for the Navigators guarded the terrible secrets of the Great Destroyer and none might use such mighty weapons. They aided him when they could, for out of savage isolation was coming once again the unity that means life among the stars. The Imperatrix Alys followed her illustrious father and added to the Imperium with the help of the warlords of the Edge. For it has always been among the people of the Edge that the Imperial power is strongest. Man, in the pain and agony of a thousand tiny wars, was feeling the birth pains of a new golden age. *But one in which atomic power would be forever controlled by a benevolent Order.* Man might fight, but they would fight man to man, and with light weapons alone.

Mass destruction and the murder of worlds would be forever beyond them....

"Until now!" Malthus' voice went harsh again. "On Aurora I saw *Atomics* used. And the worlds of the Edge waste their substance on fratricidal war. I see a pattern, lady. There is a great evil at work in the Imperium. And it bears the power of the Great Destroyer that can smash us all. *It must be stopped!*"

Janessa thought again of Kevin. After hearing Malthus, the stature of the soldier-priest had grown in her mind, but she was still a prisoner and sick at heart.

"Kevin," she said slowly, "may be a Navigator, Malthus, but he is still a Valkyr prince. What will he say when Hulse tells him that my people are responsible for that?" She raised her head significantly toward the upper levels of the keep where Ker-on lay.

"Kevin will hear me," Malthus declared. "He must. This evil must be found. And I can tell him where it will be discovered."

Janessa's eyes widened. "You know where?"

Malthus nodded. "Such weapons as the strangers from space used on Aurora could be found only in one place in the Imperium. In the place where they were first conceived. In the place that died under their acrid touch. In the place where the First Empire was born, lady. On Earth. *On the Dead World!*"

"Gods, Malthus! You would tread on the unholy soil of...of the... *Dead World?* The place of All Evil?" Janessa felt herself faint with superstitious dread and terror.

The warlock nodded. "I am an old man, lady. To rid the Imperium of this hideous thing, I would risk even the *Dead World.*"

Janessa sat deep in thought, a struggle going on within her. A lifetime of feudal ignorance was fighting with her basic sense of right. Finally she said quietly. "I, too, Malthus...."

They sat in silence, both shaken by the words they had spoken and the thoughts that raced through their

minds. Presently they became aware that only the distant booming of the surf sounded through the ancient halls of the citadel. The keening of the mourners had stopped.

It was Malthus who spoke first. His voice was heavy and dull. "May Kevin come soon, lady," he said. "Kreon is dead."

CHAPTER V

THEIR first warning of danger was the clatter of armed men in the passageway. Malthus glanced meaningfully at Janessa and got to his feet.

"So soon," he murmured. "I didn't think it would be so soon."

Janessa's grip on her shackles tightened automatically. "Hulse?" she asked.

Malthus nodded and stood waiting while the iron door of the cell swung open, and the tall figure of the plotter stepped down into the cubicle. Behind him were a dozen armed warriors of the guard. They filled the doorway and overflowed into the dim prison cell.

Hulse was resplendent. He ordered a guard holding a lamp forward, and piercing yellow light dispelled the gloom. Malthus' eyes widened as he saw that Hulse was carrying the Warlord's baton.

Hulse turned to his men with a pleased smile. He pointed at Malthus with Kreon's baton. "You see? It is as I said. The old warlock and the Auroran she-wolf plot together—even as they did to make sure of Kreon's death with poison!"

The warriors' faces grew dark and threatening. Janessa burst forth angrily, head high, eyes flashing.

"Liar! I have never harmed Kreon, nor has Malthus and you know it well, Hulse!"

Hulse's smile was not a pretty thing. "Janessa, you must not try to squirm out of this thing now. Kreon has died and I have called the chieftains into a war council. Think how your plscid people will die as our fighting men ride across Aurora with fire and flail..."

Janessa winced at the thought.

Hers were a peaceful people. They would fight, of course, but they would die. And she stood helplessly in chains while Hulse destroyed everything with his monstrous, insane plot.

Malthus was speaking. His voice resonant. "You wasted little time, Hulse, in usurping the power in Valkyr. But take care, Hulse. Kevin comes to avenge his father and his brother—and the Lord Kevin is a Navigator."

Hulse laughed harshly. "By the Seven Hells, warlock, so you swallow the old wives tales about the Navigators, too. I thought you would have better sense!"

The warriors with Hulse stirred uneasily. His words were dangerously close to blasphemy.

"I know," declared Malthus, "that you are involved in a scheme to weaken the Imperium by provoking wars, Hulse. And I know too that the Great Destroyer is loose again among the systems of the galaxy..."

Hulse stepped forward suddenly and struck Malthus sharply across the mouth with a mailed hand. The warlock staggered, but remained erect, blood streaking his white beard.

"It will do no good, Hulse," said Malthus. "No good at all."

Hulse spoke to a warrior at his elbow. "Arrest this man. I say that he aided this woman to poison our late Warlord..."

Malthus nodded. "It is true that Kreon was given poison, but it was not I and not the Princess of Aurora who added to Kreon's death burden of wounds." He extended a long finger at Hulse. "It was you, and no other!"

In desperation, Janessa turned to the group of Valkyr warriors behind Hulse. "Nor did my people attack the feast in Astraris! Tell your comrades that it was strangers from space, in great black ships not manned by Navigators who attacked us and took Karston! Tell them..."

"Enough!" Hulse commanded sharply. "Enough of these lies! I rule here now, and I say that it was

the treachery of Aurora that killed Kreon and took Karston from us! And I say that as I rule here, there will be war! Arrest this sneaking swine of a warlock! He dies within the hour!"

The disciplined warriors laid hands on Malthus. He did not resist. Janessa watched, horrified, as irons were put on his hands and feet.

"What will you tell Kevin when he arrives, Hulse?" asked Malthus evenly. "How will you explain this?"

"There will be no need," declared Hulse shortly. "The escort of captains has arrived without him. He has returned to his precious cloister and left Valkyr in the hands of men, not priestlings!"

Janessa felt her heart sink. Kevin was not coming, then, and her hope of aid from the Order of Navigators was not to be realized. It was like the sharp slamming of a door in her face.

There was a stirring among the back ranks of the warriors in the passageway beyond the cell. They were making way and speaking in whispers.

"He must come," whispered Janessa. "He must!"

"He will not, Janessa," said Hulse flatly.

"Not so, Lord Hulse!" said an even voice from among the warriors.

Hulse whirled furiously. "Who said that?" he demanded. "Who dared?"

"I dared." A black caped figure stepped forward into the light. Trappings and armor were plain, but carried with a bearing that spoke of high birth and confidence in arms. Over the left breast, the sable cape bore a strange and yet familiar insignia. A golden spaceship and a flaming flail. Under the steel cap, dark eyes burned levelly into Hulse's.

Kevin had come home.

HULSE stared as though he were seeing a ghost. The warriors had dropped to their knees before their soldier-priest prince. Janessa and Malthus stood frozen, afraid to

break the spell. A Navigator had come.

"I had thought," said Kevin evenly, "to turn to you for help, Hulse. But now I wonder if perhaps you have not helped too much already..."

Hulse was mastering the shock of seeing Kevin alive now, and his ready tongue was coming to the rescue.

"When the captains arrived without you, lord," he said protestingly. "What was I to think? They told me that you had gone away toward the sea."

"I went to Melissande. My impatience was almost my death. Or perhaps you know that, Hulse?" asked Kevin softly.

Hulse was aghast. "You were attacked?"

"I was attacked."

"You should never have left the captains, lord. The coast is thick with marauders. By the Seven Hells, I'll have the captains whipped for this! They should have stayed by your side!"

"I bear them no malice," said Kevin.

"The lord prince is kind," murmured Hulse.

Kevin looked at Janessa and Malthus for the first time. "Why is Malthus in chains? And the lady Aurora?"

Hulse repeated his charges against the warlock and Janessa. He was wondering how much Kevin had heard, and while he spoke his plans were changing rapidly. The strike on Aurora must be accelerated, and he must reach Rog. There was need for haste, unless Kevin could be killed quietly in the castle.

He was prepared for it when Kevin said coldly: "Release them."

"My lord!" protested Hulse. "Your royal father lies unburied and you would turn his killers free?"

"Release them," said Kevin again.

Hulse shrugged sullenly and signalled a gaoler to strike the chains from the prisoners.

"It matters little, after all," he muttered to Janessa as he stood by her side. "Your freedom will not

last."

"And now," said Kevin, "I would speak with them in my quarters." He looked straight at Hulse. "Alone."

Hulse shrugged again. As you command...lord." He turned and started through the ranks of warriors.

"Hulse!" Kevin's voice was steely. A voice to be obeyed.

"Lord Kevin?"

Kevin extended his hand. "My father's baton, Hulse, if you please."

Hulse placed the jewelled cylinder in the Navigator's outstretched hand. For an instant, hatred blazed in his eyes. Kevin had made him look foolish before the warriors and before Janessa. Kevin, he thought savagely, would pay for that...

CHAPTER VI

THE LIGHTS were soft in Kevin's quarters, and though the storm still raged about the battlements of Melissande, it was warm and pleasant before the fire on the hearth. The remnants of a meal lay still on the low table, for Kevin had given instructions that there should be no interruptions.

Malthus stood before the fire, his eyes bright as he spoke. Janessa, cleansed of her prison grime and clad in a shimmering translucent gown sat by Kevin's side, her eyes fixed on the young Navigator's lean, intense face.

Malthus had almost finished "...and it is there, I think, that Karston will be found. I do not know who has sought the mysteries of the Dead World, Kevin, but it is a certainty that someone has. Atomics were used on Aurora. A large section of Astraris is a radiating ruin. We must seek the answer on Earth..."

"But what of this war against Aurora? Hulse has aroused the chieftains and you know our people well enough to know that I cannot simply call it off. They will want an explanation—and we can give them nothing but theories. Hulse can do better—and will," said Kevin thoughtfully.

"We must act before the war council meets," Malthus said. "Can you get us a spaceship?"

Kevin nodded. "One awaits me at the spaceport. It is but a small vessel, yet it will serve for the two of us."

"Is it armed?"

Kevin's eyes veiled. "Well enough," he said.

Malthus did not pursue the point further. He knew that there were many secrets among the Navigators, and seeker though he was, he had no desire to pry.

"But what of Hulse?" asked Janessa. "If you leave here will he not be able to launch the attack against my world?"

Kevin nodded agreement. "He must be watched. But who can do the job?"

Malthus shook his head. "There is no one."

"Valkyr I may be," said Kevin, "but I cannot remain here to handle Hulse. As a Navigator, my first duty is the destruction of those who would loose the forbidden weapons on mankind again. I must go to Earth." He looked up at the warlock. "Do you know anything of this 'Dead World'?"

"I have studied it for many years—from afar, of course. But I have copies of the old maps. They may help. And star-charts, so that we may find our way," he replied. "Is it needful, do you think, to stop on Terminus to seek the aid of the Imperatrix?"

"No," said Kevin. "She could do nothing but give us an army and that would be useless. One does not thread a needle with a mailed fist."

"I will get my charts," said Malthus. "They are hidden in my quarters."

"Take care, Malthus," warned Janessa. "Hulse is free and may do you harm." She said this with an almost accusing look at Kevin.

"I could not confine him, princess," said Kevin with a half-smile. "We Valkyrs are a democratic people in our way. I know nothing, though I suspect a great deal concerning Hulse. If I had him thrown

into a cell I would be forced to wait here until the war council of the chieftains met to explain why. I have neither the time, nor the inclination."

"You must await an overt act?"

"Something like that. At least it must be something I can prove." His face darkened. "Hulse has provoked me grievously, Janessa. He is involved with those who have killed my father and perhaps even my brother. But I cannot strike without proof."

JANESSA caught the flash of pain that crossed his features at the mention of Kreon. She touched his arm lightly. Malthus was gone and they were alone.

Kevin looked into Janessa's face and was caught by what he saw there. Her full lips were upturned and parted, her eyes fixed on him, her golden hair touched with firelight.

The Navigators lived plainly, but there were no celibates among them. They were warriors first and priests of the old knowledge second. Kevin felt his arm tighten about the girl's waist, holding her close to him. He caught his breath....

With a start, he pulled back. This was Janessa of Aurora, a star-princess, his brother's promised bride. His arm dropped from around her and he muttered an apology.

Janessa turned away, her cheeks afire. She, too, had quite suddenly remembered who and what they were.

"I...I..." She cast about for a change of subject, her pulse pounding. Her hand, still on Kevin's arm touched his bandaged wound and dropped away. "Kevin..."

Kevin reached and turned her face around with his fingertips. "Janessa," he said gently. "If only..."

He did not finish his sentence. There was a whirring, sparking sound in the room and a streak of red appeared across the girl's breast. She gave a little cry of pain and sagged into Kevin's arms. Across the room from them, a flail clattered off the wall with an angry flash of sparks.

The flail had come from the window. The tartar curtain was ripped where the missile had driven through. Kevin pulled the girl to the floor and ripped away her gown. There was a shallow gash across her chest where the pointed haft had touched her. He staunched the flow of blood quickly with strips from her dress, shouting for the guard.

Janessa grimaced with the pain and clung to Kevin. He held her in his arms and kissed her. A hate more violent than any he had ever felt before raged through him. He wanted to take the author of that sneaking attack and rip him apart with his bare hands.

Suddenly Janessa released him. "I'm all right, Kevin. I'm all right. That...that was meant for you. Hulse! It...it was...Hulse..." Her voice was unsteady. "Leave me. Follow him. He...he must not escape..." She spoke with an effort. "This...is...the overt act... you needed. *Find him!*"

Kevin's flail was in his hand as he vaulted through the window to the narrow walkway around the tower. The rain whipped his cloak quickly into a sodden weight and he discarded it. Running around the face of the tower toward the battlements, he tripped and went sprawling onto the stones. Under his feet lay the body of a dead guardsman, a jewelled dagger still in his throat.

Hulse had made good his escape.

CHAPTER VII

THE SPACESHIP was a thing of almost incredible antiquity. The long, tapering hull gleamed in the blue artificial light, reflecting shards of brilliance that touched the weapons of the warriors gathered on the plain that served as a spaceport.

The night air was full of the bustle and tension, and the metallic clash of arms and armor. Pennons from every land of Valkyr dotted the plain; camps had mushroomed.

The chieftains were gathering in response to the call Lord Hulse had sent them, and those who had ar-

rived early had centered at the space-port to voice their disapproval of Kevin's departure.

At the spaceship's valve, old Count Bayard, ruler of a tribe from the southern part of the planet, stood in stern conversation with the young Navigator and Malthus.

The lamplight etched the Count's ruddy face in orange tones. His jewelled trappings glittered, and the plumes of his helmet shook angrily as he spoke.

"You have no right to leave now, Kevin!" he was growling, "and even less to refuse to tell us where you go. Your place is here, with your chieftains, planning vengeance for your royal father and brother! Hulse warned us long ago that you were irresponsible—and I begin to believe it!"

Kevin's face was set and his eyes gleamed dangerously. "Don't presume on your friendship with my late father, Bayard. If I leave it is for a good reason. And rest assured that I shall return at the proper time. In the meanwhile, you will act as my regent, fulfilling my wishes and obeying my instructions. You will hold the war council in session until my return, and under no circumstances will you attack Aurora."

"You know our laws as well as I, Kevin," muttered the old warrior sullenly. "I can only recommend, I cannot command. If the war council decides against me—or rather *you*, since I wish those treacherous dogs only slow death!—then the attack will be mounted. Even the Navigators on our spaceships cannot prevent us! You know that well, Kevin!"

"Let be, Kevin," said Malthus. "If we succeed...out there, there will be no need for an attack on Aurora and no reason for it. If we fail, it will matter little, for all will be destroyed."

"What is he talking about?" demanded the Count.

Kevin ignored the question. Instead he gave one last set of instructions. "Make every effort to find Hulse, Bayard. I personally have stripped him of lands and title and declared him outlawed. He is guilty

of having attempted to kill me and wounding the lady Janessa of Aurora...."

"Small loss if that she-wolf poisoner should die," grunted Bayard.

"How gullible you have become, Count," said Malthus drily.

"Nevertheless, Hulse is to be found and held 'till my return," ordered Kevin.

THE COUNT BAYARD saluted grumpily and stomped out of the valve. Kevin closed the ponderous door and he and Malthus were alone in the air lock.

"Do you think Hulse is still on Valkyr?" asked the warlock.

"Do you?"

Malthus shook his head.

"Nor do I," said Kevin. "It would be unlike him to play a dangerous game here without having a secret spaceship ready to carry him away. I don't like it. It means that whoever has taken over the ruins of the Dead World has found many things there that should not be available to men as yet." He shrugged. "Come, now. We must start before those bloodthirsty idiots out there take it into their heads to detain us by force." He turned and led the way along the dark companionways—dark because the lamps set into the ornate wall sconces had not been lit.

Kevin was thinking moodily as he reached the control room in the very tip of the ship. "Malthus," he said. "About Janessa—are you sure she will be safe where you hid her?"

Malthus did not answer for a moment, and when he did, his reply was evasive. "I took her to the only place where she would be safe."

Kevin was still not satisfied. He found himself missing the Auroran girl's company more than he expected. "Will she have protection?" he asked. "After all she is wounded and surrounded by enemies...."

Malthus smiled. "Not entirely, Kevin. And as to protection—let me say that she will have the very best we can afford."

Kevin nodded, satisfied at least for the moment. He turned his attention

to the running of the spaceship.

This was what he had been trained for. The various levers and switches marked with mystic symbols came to life under his practiced hands. Far below, in the long sealed compartment along the keel of the ship, the ancient eternal engines began to mutter as their coils sucked power from the very curvature of hyperspace itself. A thrill of movement shook the ship. It came alive under the Navigator's touch. It shuddered and began to rise into the night sky of Valkyr.

Gaining speed, it reached for the sparse stars. Space was barren in the Outer Marches of the Imperium. The periphery of the galaxy was a lonely and forbidding region. Into the night of space, the ancient vessel drove, and the darkness closed in about it. Out of the blackness below, the streak of light that was Valkyr's terminator appeared. The planet became a crescent, a quarter. The blazing Valkyr Sun burst into view, flooding the dim control room with its light.

Kevin touched a graduated dial and the scene beyond the wide port became unreal—a wavering thing of streaked and dancing prismatic. The mighty spaceship teetered on the brink of hyperspace....and plunged in.

Kevin opaqued the port to blot out the greyish blankness that human eyes should not see. It was a jarring emptiness that made the stomach contract and the mind spin with vertigo. Men had gone mad staring out into that emptiness.

The control room was pitch dark now, but for the glow of the luminous instruments. Kevin, caped and cowed, looked like some fantastic magician at work in the eerie light.

A hand touched his shoulder and he turned distractedly. Behind him stood a figure clad in mail and weapon-harness. But a slight figure, and one betrayed by the clinging sheen of the tight metal tunic.

There was no surprise. Kevin only smiled and caught her hand. It had been the only way, of course, and

Malthus had seen to it.

It was Janessa.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PLANET that had been Earth was a shambles. Its surface, once a glittering casque of glass and steel, was ripped and sundered. Here, the Thousand Emperors had ruled their mighty civilization. From Earth, the mother world, the tides of empire had swept out across the galaxy, mounting tier on shining tier, crashing with armored thunder on worlds of the Edge, and straining across the intergalactic gulfs toward the awful seetee suns of Andromeda and Comae Berenices.

And here, these men like gods had died, trapped on their helpless planet when the tide of Empire had ebbed, and the backwash of internecine war had swept over them. Savage warlords from outworld planets had tramped the gleaming halls, butchering and raping. The Great Throne had been shattered by the mace-blows of a rabble in arms, the sheathing of Earth had been dismembered and looted, and then had come the bombs....

For uncounted decades that stretched out into centuries then, Earth lay in ruins surrounded by the shroud of superstitious dread that pervaded the Interregnum. It was the place of All Evil, the lair of Science, the Great Destroyer.

Yet the long silence of death had been broken. Amid the shattered rubble, androids moved now. The deep cellars and laboratories had been reopened. Someone had dared the place of All Evil, and with discontented men and androids, was building again the awful weapons that had nearly destroyed the galaxy.

In a room carved from the wreckage of a once mighty palace, the android Rog watched a nervously pacing Valkyr warrior with ill-concealed satisfaction. The dwarfish face was distorted by a grimace of malicious pleasure.

"You failed, Hulse," said the android pointedly. "Failed miserably,

because you are a fool."

Lord Hulse glared angrily, but did not reply.

"You have endangered the whole master plan," pursued the android with obvious enjoyment. "You could not even eliminate Kevin and that meddlesome warlock. The master is displeased, Hulse. He will have to strike at Terminus now without the assurance that Valkyr and Aurora will be otherwise occupied."

"What does it matter?" demanded the Valkyr. "We have the spaceships and the atomic weapons. What has the Imperatrix to counter that?"

The android shrugged and drew his cloak tighter about his heavy shoulders. "The Navigators. Is that enough?"

"The Navigators! The Navigators! Always the Navigators! What have they but the old spaceships and a ritual of mummery to impress the outworlders?" cried Hulse.

Rog laughed. The sound was a steely one. "You know better, Hulse. But have no fear. The Navigators will not interfere. I have seen to it, Hulse. I an *android*..."

Hulse ignored the thrust. "You have found Kevin?"

"Of course. The moment your ship arrived here I knew that he would follow. I have sent a spaceship—*manned by androids*—to intercept him. The ships of the Navigators are ancient. They have no weapons. This time, Hulse, there will be no mistakes." Rog grinned maliciously. "Now go and ready yourself. The master would have words with you. Words that you are not likely to enjoy hearing." The android rose and bowed mockingly. "Good night, my lord."

Hulse strode out of the room, the scar on his cheek—where Janessa had marked him—afire with fury. Rog's insolent laughter followed him down the long empty passageway.

KEVIN watched the luminous screen before him in perplexity. The dark shape limned there was a spaceship—but a spaceship unlike any he had ever seen before. There was a nasty functionalism to

its heavy contours and turreted extremities. It was obviously a warship, and it had picked them up in hyperspace, dogging their wake, steadily gaining on them. It was, Kevin realized, no Navigator's vessel, and it was new. Much newer and much faster than the craft he controlled.

That the strange ship had been built on the Dead World, the young Navigator did not doubt. And if this were so, it followed that it carried atomic weapons and would use them. The one thing that bothered Kevin was the possibility that he would be forced to fight it. The Navigator's ships were not helpless, though their armament was thought to be nonexistent by the laity. But Kevin wondered how his weapons would match up with the newer and possibly more deadly weapons of the mysterious plotters who had taken over the ruins of Earth.

As if in answer to his questions, a bright streak leaped from the black spaceship toward him. Unconsciously, Kevin altered his course. A moment later there was a sun-bright coruscation off to one side, and a clatter of metallic fragments on the hull.

The sudden movement of the ship had alarmed Janessa and Malthus, and they stumbled into the control room, wide-eyed and still confused with sleep.

Kevin moved aside to let them see the strange ship in the screen. Janessa gasped, and Malthus murmured an oath.

"It is the same!" cried the girl. "The very same!"

"Same?" demanded Kevin. "You have seen ships like that before?"

"Ships of that design attacked the feast on Aurora, Kevin," said Malthus with feeling. "We are drawing close to the source."

Kevin felt a pang of jealousy. He looked up at Janessa. "Then we are not far from Karston. Where these ships come from—there we will find my brother—" And he could not help adding: "And your betrothed, Janessa."

Janessa looked away, unwilling to meet his eyes. "Does it matter?" she

asked. "That ship is armed and we are helpless. We are at the end of the road."

Kevin shook his head and removed a section of the instrument panel, baring another beneath. "We are not entirely helpless. But may the Gods of Space be with us, for this ship is old and that one mighty."

Malthus seemed to recognize the secret panel. His old eyes brightened. "The Atom Gods! We are armed with the forbidden weapons!"

Janessa stared, and made the sign of the flail on her breast. "May they protect us," she murmured reverently.

The spaceship from the Dead World closed rapidly. Its first probing shot had given the range, and now a steady stream of atomic missiles poured from its turrets. Kevin sat sweating at the controls, flinging the ancient vessel back and forth across miles of space in evasive gyrations. Soundless, blinding explosions dotted the void, blotting out the stars and the crescents of Earth and Moon now nearby.

to the blazing night of space.

Fragments clattered against the hull in a cacophony of terror. Kevin clung to his panel and fired back, his own torpedoes adding their fire.

The two ships flung inward toward the Dead World on parallel trajectories, spitting flame. There was no thought in Kevin's mind of retreat into hyperspace. Their ship was too close now to the planetary mass of Earth. It was fight or die.

A ripping, shrieking roar suddenly filled the ship. The three in the control room moaned in agony as the air-pressure dropped painfully, doubling them up with aeroembolism. The ship had taken a near miss, and the hull was breached. Kevin threw himself forward across the panel and struck the damage control relays. Airtight doors slammed and the pressure began to build up again weakly.

Janessa and Malthus sat frozen in mixed pain and terror, watching and feeling a battle of giants. Forces unknown to them and their feudal worlds clattered and screamed

about them as the awful power of the Atom Gods seemed to sunder space itself.

Kevin swung suddenly toward the attacking ship. His own craft was damaged. It was now or never. Driving inward, he loosed a full barrage from the secret tubes. The last of the missiles plunged out into space, seeking the strange spaceship. Kevin watched them with a sort of resigned fascination.

The first missile missed, and the stranger pivoted into firing position. The second missile exploded violently a half-mile from the alien's bows. It seemed to stagger from the force of the near miss and began to tumble end over end in an unrealistic acrobatic dance. The third and fourth and fifth struck it fairly amidships, and the black craft dissolved into an expanding bubble of light and melting debris.

Kevin drew a shuddering sigh. The battle was over. For the time being at least, they had won.

SLOWLY, like a great silver fish, the wounded spaceship sank downward toward the forbidding night side of Earth. A gibbous moon bathed the desolation below with pale radiance. Kevin, Malthus, and Janessa gazed through the port at the ruins below.

Once, the mammoth city that had ruled the galaxy had covered the entire planet like a sheath of glass and metal—but now huge rents in the surface showed dark where the stuff of the world's inner crust had been rolled and bared by the force of atomic bombs. Here and there vegetation had grown in these gaps, but in the light of the moon they could see that it was grotesque and vaguely obscene stuff, drawing its substance from a soil that had been forever poisoned by the by-products of fission.

"Indeed," muttered Malthus, "this is the place of All Evil. It reeks of death."

Kevin shuddered to think of his proud brother being held prisoner on such a planet. He glanced at the charts—yellow with age—that Mal-

thus had given him. They had agreed that the only possible place were facilities capable of producing the forbidden weapons might be found would be a district far from the ruins of the governmental offices. Malthus had marked the location on the chart and Kevin had striven to take the spaceship as near there as possible without risking detection. The place was called H'nford—a strange and exotic name.

"As nearly as I can reckon it," said Kevin presently, "we are over this H'nford."

Malthus and Janessa stared downward through the port, but nothing but moonlit desolation greeted their gaze.

"I see nothing," said the girl. "Wait! Look there, Malthus! Did you see a light?"

"There is nothing now," replied the warlock.

"It was a light," Janessa said, running a nervous hand over her mailed arm. "I saw it clearly."

Kevin nodded and let the spaceship drop lower. Silently and very, very gently, the long tapering craft settled down amid the rubble. There was a scraping noise as the weight of the ship crushed the weathered remnants of once mighty structures ... and then silence. A heavy silence, pregnant with unknown danger and dread.

CHAPTER IX

JANESSA, under protest, had remained in the ship. Malthus and Kevin had spent the night exploring. They stood now, flails in hand, among the rubble a half-mile from the ship. In the east, the sky was growing light. Kevin listened, perplexed. From somewhere, a faint but throaty rumbling sound seemed to come. He had heard it since stepping out of the ship, but their search had uncovered nothing but ruins and ghastly plant-life.

Kevin dropped to his knees, still listening. For a long while he remained so, and when he arose he said: "The sound comes from under us, Malthus."

"Machinery," said the warlock.

"The whole region must be honeycombed with caverns. Somehow we must find our way down."

"My maps may help us there," Malthus said. "There is certainly nothing on the surface—"

As though to give his words the lie, a face appeared among the rubble. For a moment both the Navigator and Malthus stood frozen by surprise. In the faint dawn-light, they could see the gross features plainly. It was unmistakably an android.

Kevin recovered first, leaping to the attack. This prowler could not be allowed to spread the alarm.

Sparks flashed in the dawn as the Navigator met the android's flail with his own. Kevin, in his anxiety to end the combat quickly, almost electrocuted himself on the creature's weapon.

The android was no flailsman, but he defended himself well. Try, as he might, he could not strike the finishing lash. Malthus stood aside, for he felt himself more hindrance than help in the close quarters amid the wreckage.

Uppermost in the Navigator's mind was the notion that this android might not be alone. Quite suddenly, this idea was confirmed, and Kevin's heart contracted with fear.

Above the clash of battle, he heard a single shrill cry—a woman's cry for help. Kevin struck mightily with his flail and watched the chain wrap around the android's body. Then the ball struck home and Kevin heard a hum of killing power, and in a moment the android lay dead at his feet.

He wrenched the flail free and turned fearfully toward the spaceship, Malthus following at his best speed. The sight that greeted them made Kevin's breath catch in his throat. The valve hung open and within there was only silence.

Kevin and Malthus stared, afraid to speak. The Navigator vaulted into the ship, running wildly now toward the control room. He burst in and

stopped short in dismay.
Janessa was gone.

"**H**ERE, KEVIN, and here," said Malthus, pointing to the old map. "These are tunnel mouths that may give access to the vaults beneath."

Kevin found it hard to concentrate. His mind was full of his own carelessness and failure. Now both Karston and Janessa were in the hands of the mysterious plotters of the Dead World, and success seemed far away indeed.

"These charts show that a way of destroying this entire section was included by the builders—a system of mines, using the power of the atom. It may be that these mines are still intact, for the last of the Thousand Emperors was a coward, the legends say."

Kevin nodded distractedly. He was impatient and chafed to begin the search for Janessa and his brother.

Malthus and the Navigator crouched in the shadow of an overturned monument, out of the slanting rays of the sinking sun. A full day had passed in restless inactivity, for nothing could be done in daylight save move the spaceship to a better hiding place. This done, they waited and planned.

"That single spire that remains over there," Malthus pointed, "is the ruin of this skylon shown on the map, I think. Beneath it is one of the tunnel openings into the vaults. And behind it, where that grove of stunted trees grows is the other. See? It is this one that might lead to the chamber where the mines' detonator is located." He frowned and squinted across the jumbled landscape. "If these plotters know of the danger to their base, they will have this tunnel well-guarded. If not—" His old eyes glittered and he did not finish.

Kevin fingered the haft of his flail and muttered an oath. "I must find her, Malthus. By the Gods of Space, I must find her!"

The warlock laid a hand on the younger man's shoulder, but he could say nothing. Kevin was deep in self-

criticism, and Malthus had seen the bond growing unbidden between him and the princess of Aurora.

The sun sank lower, and Kevin and Malthus ate sparingly of the ration of concentrates they carried in their belt pouches. At last it was evening. The stars began to fill the sky in a profusion unknown to these men of the Outer Marches. The misty luminosity of the Galactic Lens' edge formed a faintly silver river across the heavens.

"It is even as the old books have said," breathed Malthus, looking upward. "Truly this was once a fitting center for a mighty empire..."

"It is almost time, Malthus," said Kevin.

"I have a plan, Kevin," offered the warlock. "Listen. I am old and can be of little help to you. Therefore I shall seek this place alone..." He let his finger fall on the mine-center. "You follow the sound of the machines down this other tunnel. Where the machines are to be found, there will you find what you are seeking. Meanwhile, I will try to solve the riddle of the ancient ones' trap. Perhaps I will uncover the means to wipe out this nest."

KEVIN THOUGHT for a moment and then agreed, but he said: "Take great care, Malthus, if you find this place. The power of the Atom Gods is strange and you may set in motion forces that you cannot recall."

"I will be careful," Malthus replied. "And guard yourself too, Kevin. Remember we are alone here. I will meet you at the spaceship at dawn."

Kevin nodded, and watched while the old warlock slipped out into the open and was swallowed up by the darkness of the night. The Navigator glanced at the sky. It would be a full three hours before the moon would rise. Until then he could move about with relative immunity. He loosened his weapons and set out toward the twisted spire that loomed a darker shadow against the unfamiliar stars.

The tunnel mouth was not cov-

ered with debris, as he had expected it to be. Instead it yawned wide, and the ground underfoot was worn smooth with the passage of many wheeled vehicles. From within the tunnel a faint light emanated.

Kevin pressed himself against a huge pavingstone that stood upright near the tunnel. Limned against the lighted opening stood an armed guard. The stocky figure suggested an android.

Kevin pulled back into the darkness and dropped to his hands and knees. Carefully, soundlessly, he worked himself around the tunnel mouth and up the slight slope beside it. Presently he crouched above the arch and directly above and behind the drowsy guard.

Kevin stood erect. His foot touched a loose bit of detritus and sent it clattering down the slope. Suddenly awake, the guard whipped out his flail and half-turned. His questing shout was cut off by the leaping figure of the Navigator dropping on his shoulders, dagger held stiffly point-down.

The guard crumpled under Kevin's weight and the blade struck home. He died with a mumbling, watery sigh. Kevin stood up and pulled his blade free, glancing down the sloping tunnel. He was still alone. No sound but the faraway rumble of machinery came to his straining ears.

Kevin started downward, his shadow dancing crazily behind him, and then leaping out ahead like some fantastic devil as he passed each successive flambeau.

For what seemed a long while, Kevin made his way down, passing uncounted branching tunnels—all dark. Abruptly he stopped and listened. What he heard set his heart to racing. It was the measured tread of marching feet and the clatter of weapons. The guard was being relieved, and the squad was marching up the same tunnel where Kevin stood, momentarily irresolute.

He had the impulse to stand and fight, but then he realized that he would be one against far too many. There was only retreat left him—and he must move quickly.

Turning, he fled back up the tunnel to the nearest branch. The side burrow loomed dark and menacing, but he plunged inward without a backward glance. A few stumbling steps into the blackness, he stopped to listen. With a silent curse on his lips he heard the guard captain say to one of his men:

"The spaceship sent out failed to intercept them, and Rog is displeased—so take care that no one passes here, Ranam. Watch and do not sleep!"

KEVIN realized that they were being searched for, and that each branching tunnel would now be guarded. He listened for some mention of Janessa, but heard nothing more beyond a few routine soldierly complaints and the fading of the squad's footsteps up the tunnel.

He could not return to the main tunnel now. The mouth of the branch was guarded, and as soon as the body of the guard he had killed was found a search would begin in every byway of the main burrow. There was only one way to go, and that was ahead, into the Stygian blackness of the burrow.

Kevin travelled in darkness for what may have been a half-hour before he dared risk the light of his pocket torch. He saw then that the floor of this burrow was only half-choked with rubble and tracks lay half-buried underfoot. Long ago, millenia perhaps, a vehicle had run along these ways. It was a comfort to the Navigator to know that the burrow was not a dead end, at least.

Kevin walked cautiously for an hour and more, before a faint light ahead made him pause. There was no movement ahead, but the sound of machinery was suddenly loud, and the light brightened as he drew near.

Ahead lay a deserted gallery. On one side a series of graceful arches faced the source of the light and sound while on the other, there was only the smooth rock face of the tunnel wall.

Kevin moved forward, flail in hand. Just ahead lay the first arch, and

beyond that a dozen more. The gallery ended in darkness and a continuation of the tunnel.

Kevin reached the first arch and moved carefully around the fluted column that supported it. What he saw made him doubt his own sanity.

A vast underground chamber spread out below, a room so huge that its dimensions were lost in the flickering light of a thousand lamps. The floor lay a good three hundred feet below the gallery and the roof arched up to unknown heights. Within this monstrous hall, a clatter of machines jarred the ears. And in rows, stretching out as far as he could see, Kevin looked upon a monster fleet of spaceships in every stage of construction. Great, powerful vessels, designed like the warship he had destroyed beyond the moon. Figures of men and androids moved among these ships, tending the ancient machines and overseeing a thousand small tasks.

Kevin sank back against the wall, shaken. He had not realized the size and scope of the plot he faced until he saw this!

FOR A long while, Kevin watched the great hangar from his hiding-place on the deserted gallery. He began to doubt his ability to cope with a plot of such magnitude, but there was nothing to be done now. He was too well committed to do anything but continue forward.

The faraway echo of men running alerted him. The sound was coming from the dark maw of the tunnel. The guards had found their dead comrade on the surface; the search for him had begun.

Behind him lay capture—ahead, the unknown. Kevin dropped to his hands and knees and crawled past the arches to where the burrow began again. This time he dared not risk a light.

Breathlessly, he ran through the darkness, stumbling and staggering over unseen obstacles. Then quite suddenly he crashed against a solid wall of rubble. The impact sent him reeling backward.

Quickly he lit his pocket torch.

What he saw made him cry out with dismay. The tunnel was closed—choked with debris. He was trapped.

This then, was the end of his adventure. He would die like a rat in this underground *cul-de-sac*. The blood of a thousand fighting ancestors raged at the thought. Savagely, he set to work pulling stones from the pile, setting up a barricade between himself and his pursuers.

The old masonry came away freely, and soon Kevin had erected a low breastwork across the tunnel floor that would at least offer some protection. Then he knelt in the darkness, waiting.

A cool draft struck him on the back of the legs, and he moved away with an unconscious annoyance. Then the significance of that cold air came to him, and he whirled and began to rip at the rubble wall behind him. The draft grew stronger. Behind him the sounds of the pursuit grew louder.

Now a faint light seeped through the piled stonework. Kevin tore at the pile with bloodied fingers until at last he could worm his way into a narrow opening where three stones had wedged to form a jagged tubeway. For perhaps twenty tortuous feet, Kevin worked his way under the wreckage, emerging at last into a dim chamber lit by a single lamp. As he moved to pull himself out from his tight-fitting tubeway, a sullen rumble began. The rocks, dislodged by his movements, collapsed, shutting off the opening.

The Navigator felt a crushing pain in his legs as the rubble fell. Suppressing a moan, he dragged himself clear and onto the floor of the wide chamber.

For a long while Kevin sat on the flagstones, gritting his teeth against the inroads of the pain in his legs. Presently he gathered his strength and staggered to his feet. A flood of relief came over him. His legs were torn and streaked with blood and dust, but though they shot lancets of pain through him each time he moved, he was reasonably certain no real damage had been done. And

the pursuers were cut off....

Kevin turned his attention to the room in which he found himself. It showed some signs of occupancy. The floors were reasonably clear of detritus and there were cases and weapons stacked along the walls. Apparently this chamber was being used as a store-room. Ahead lay a curtained archway, and a dark room.

MOVING with some difficulty, Kevin shoved aside the curtain cautiously and looked about him. He stood in the archway of a luxuriously furnished sleeping apartment. Clothes and trappings, furs and weapons lay about as though they had been recently discarded. He picked up a rich cape that lay thrown carelessly across the still-warm bed. His eyes widened. In the dim light he could make out the arms of Valkyr blazoned in gems on the silvery fabric.

Kevin looked about him. Everything in this room indicated recent occupancy. At the far end of the chamber, still another curtained arch stood. The drapes were drawn, but Kevin could see the light of many lamps shining through them, and outlined against the fabric, the silhouette of a tall man....

Kevin's flail slithered silently from its sheathing. He moved toward the arch, ready to strike at the first sign of movement. But there was none. Instead, there came the sound of footsteps as several people entered the outer room. Kevin cursed silently. Now the man limned against the draperies was not alone. The Navigator flattened himself against a wall and listened. Soon the sound of angry voices came to him. Kevin's brows knit in perplexity, two of the voices were tantalizingly familiar.

"So you failed too, Rog! By the Seven Hells, I'm surrounded by incompetents!"

"Sir, I promise you that I will have him before dawn. The woman is already in our hands." A pause, and then: "That, at least, is more than the mighty lord could accomplish!"

"Android pig! I've taken all I am going to from you! Flail, damn you!"

"By the Gods of Space, stop it, you two!" came the resonant powerful voice. "I have not spent years planning for this to have your stupid prejudices ruin everything now! You, Hulse, are a fool! You could not even prevent Kevin's meddling! And you, Rog, are even worse than a fool, sending a ship manned by androids out to battle a Navigator! Did you ever stop to think what would have happened if that young idiot Kevin had not rushed to land after the fight? Suppose he had returned to Algol and the Citadel of the Navigators? What then, Rog?"

Kevin felt his cheeks burning. The stranger with the resonant voice was right, of course. He had been an idiot and worse not to return to Algol for help. Now Janessa was in the hands of these men and he was helpless against them.

Kevin's hand clenched on the haft of his flail. Hulse was almost in reach of him and he could do nothing, for fear of harming Janessa.

"Rog," commanded the powerful voice, "bring the princess of Aurora here to me."

"Is that wise?" demanded Hulse.

"What does it matter now? In spite of your bungling, I will mount the first attack on Terminus tomorrow—"

Kevin's heart sank. Tomorrow! As soon as that.

"But we are not up to full strength," protested Hulse.

"You still think in terms of dagger and flail, Hulse. We need only the fifty ships already completed to completely wipe out the Imperial City. And without an Imperatrix what star-king will dare oppose me?"

"But Valkyr...?"

The voice was steady. "I would have spared Valkyr the power of the Atom Gods, Hulse, but you have failed me. If need be I will level the planet."

Traitor though he was, Hulse seemed to still feel something for the planet of his birth. "By the gods, sir—"

"Do you think I will stop at that?"

Now? Hulse, I have been a party to the most heinous crimes for the sake of the new empire! I have gone against blood and country, against liege and religion for this! Can I spare Valkyr now?" demanded the voice with deep feeling.

Kevin stepped forward, weapon ready. A sick suspicion was growing within him, and with it a pulsing rage.

Janessa's voice caught him up sharply.

"So you are here, Hulse! You filthy pig! Don't come near me—my stomach turns at the sight of you!"

Then apparently, the girl became aware of the other man in the room for the first time. Kevin heard her strangled gasp:

"Oh, Gods! You...!"

There was no time for more. Kevin thrust aside the curtain and stepped into the room, flail poised to strike.

The sudden shock of the tableau that met his eyes staggered Kevin. Hulse stood at the far end of the room, eyes wide with surprise and quick fear. Janessa, still dressed in her shirt of mail but weaponless stood by the squat figure of an android. But it was the other that shook Kevin to the heart.

The tall figure stood not ten feet from him, carelessly dressed and unarmed—but regal.

It was as though Kevin looked into a mirror and saw his own face as it might be after ten more years of a life filled with battle and driving, searing ambition.

The Navigator's flail dropped limply to his side, a sickening knowledge oozed through him like bitter gall.

"Karston...." he said faintly. "You."

CHAPTER X

KARSTON smiled slowly. It was not a friendly smile.

"Yes, brother," he said. "Are you surprised?"

Kevin shook his head dully. "Not really. I should have guessed. Valkyr would never have been enough to sate your appetite for power...."

"No."

Kevin looked at his brother with mute appeal. "But our father, Karston. You didn't..."

"I did, Kevin. I ordered his death."

Kevin felt ill. He stared at his brother's proud and suddenly evil face. This was a man of his own blood—parricide, traitor, plotter. There had always been a hardness, a cruelty in him that kept him apart from Kevin. Now at last, it was in the open. Kevin felt a thrill of complete hatred. He dropped his flail to the flagstones. It rang sharply. No one moved.

Kevin walked slowly toward Karston. Still no move was made to stop him. Karston was smiling at him with that iron-hard grimace of complete cruelty. Kevin felt a reddish film of fury falling over his eyes. His hands opened and closed spasmodically.

Suddenly, the room went mad. Kevin swung hard and caught his brother across the mouth with his open left hand. Hulse leaped to Karston's defense, and Janessa struck Rog with all her strength. The android staggered, stunned by the unexpected blow. Janessa pulled the dagger from Rog's weapon-harness and leaped for Hulse.

Kevin drove his brother to the wall, fists crashing again and again into his face. He was blind with agonized rage. He wanted to kill Karston with his bare hands. Karston struck back strongly, jolting Kevin with sledge-hammer blows.

Hulse grabbed at the crossed straps of Kevin's harness and pulled him back, his dagger raised. Suddenly Hulse stiffened, released Kevin and staggered backward. On his shoulders, like a fury, Janessa clung, Rog's dagger stained with crimson as she drove the blade again and again into Hulse's chest. He fell to his knees with a look of wide-eyed disbelief on his face. Then he pitched forward and lay twitching in a pool of his own blood.

Rog got to his feet and wrenched the dagger away from Janessa, sending her staggering with a blow across the face. He leaped into the melee,

where Karston and Kevin rolled in savage combat on the bloodied floor, striking at Kevin wildly.

Janessa got to her hands and knees with an effort and reached Kevin's fallen flail. Now Rog and Karston had Kevin down, each trying to get in the death blow. Karston with his fists and Rog with his flashing dagger.

Janessa pushed Kevin's flail toward his outstretched clutching hand. He grabbed it, and with a superhuman effort he swung the heavy weapon. The haft of it caught Karston on the forehead and he slumped soundlessly to the floor. Kevin leaped to his feet as Rog whipped up fallen Hulse's flail and launched himself at the Navigator.

Pain from his injured legs and from a dozen flesh-wounds shot through Kevin. He was clumsy and off balance, and the android's charge threw him back to the wall. He swung his flail frantically until he could get his balance. Rog, android or not, was a flailsman. He pressed in upon Kevin and the room resounded to the ringing clash of weapons, to the flying lightnings of the two lashing flails.

Rog aimed a blow at the Navigator's head which Kevin barely parried. He stumbled on Hulse's body, and only his cape saved him from Rog's quick attack.

Back to the wall, Kevin turned to the attack. He feinted a thrust at Rog's legs and as the flail came down for the parry, Kevin's weapon brushed the android's neck. Rog gave a grunt of pain and pressed forward. Kevin side-stepped his charge and heard Janessa shouting something to him, but he dared not turn to see. Rog whirled and narrowly missed Kevin's throat with a wild whiplike motion. Kevin forced Rog's flail aside and struck with his own. The chain wrapped tight around the android's body and it stood stiffly still for a moment. His flail dropped from nerveless fingers and then he teetered unsteadily on his feet. He fell heavily across the body of Hulse, and there was silence in the room.

Janessa was at Kevin's side now,

ripping away strips of fabric from her tunic to bind his wounds. He stood panting, looking around him. Except for the girl, the room was empty. Karston was gone.

"I tried to tell you, Kevin," she said shakily. "He came to while you were fighting and ran for that passageway." She pointed to a dark tunnel that led from the chamber.

"Then we've failed," said Kevin bitterly. "He's escaped us, and the attack on Terminus has been planned for tomorrow—today now. There is no time left for us."

Janessa clung to him. "Kevin, you have done all you can. We must leave this place before Karston's people find us here. He'll be back with help—and soon."

Kevin nodded dully. He felt spent and weak. He had done all he could do. The only thing that remained in his mind was escape and safety for Janessa.

Together they started up the long, dark passageway.

THE PURSUIT began quickly. Kevin could hear the clatter of armed men reverberating up the tunnel as they ran. His breath came in short rasping sobs now, for he was shaky with fatigue and discouragement.

For what seemed hours, Janessa and Kevin ran up the ill-lighted tunnels, darting into each successive new branch until at last they could no longer hear the sounds of their pursuers.

"We've lost them," Janessa said. "And lost ourselves, too," muttered Kevin.

It was true. They were hopelessly entangled in the underground maze that honeycombed this section of the ancient ruins. But they could only continue onward and hope.

Hour followed hour, and they wandered through the dark corridors. At last they could go no further and they dropped to the rubble-choked floor to rest.

There was nothing to be said. Kevin leaned back against the tunnel wall wearily, Janessa's head on his shoulder. It both comforted him and

infuriated him that they were together. That their great adventure should end this way filled him with helpless fury—but having Janessa by his side, feeling her close to him filled him with a contentment he had never known before. He kissed her hair and her lips, tasting what he knew now he would never have abandoned to Karston.

Suddenly she straightened. "Listen!" she said.

Kevin strained to hear. From somewhere ahead came the sound of gears grinding. Kevin leaped to his feet, pulling the girl after him.

In tight silence, they made their way forward, around a bend in the burrow. A rectangle of light betrayed a door. Kevin ran forward and shoved it ajar, dagger free.

WITH Janessa close behind him, Kevin stepped into a lighted room. This place too was strewn with rubble and wreckage, but the Navigator recognized it instantly. He had seen such a room in the Cloister on Algol. The dials bore unfamiliar markings, and the control panels were strange and archaic but it was unmistakably a control center for an atomic power plant.

Seated before one of the panels was a hooded figure that turned in alarm as they entered. Kevin leaped forward, dagger ready to strike.

And then the light struck a white beard and a silvery nimbus of hair. It was Malthus.

"By the gods, Kevin, you gave me a start!" Then the old warlock caught sight of Janessa and he came forward to embrace her. "You did it, Kevin!"

Kevin nodded and turned away. He had to tell the old warlock a thing that pained him to put into words.

"Malthus," he said slowly, "Hulse is dead. And—"

"And what? What? Tell me quickly," cried the old man eagerly. "What have you found out?"

"The leader is.... Karston."

"No! By the Seven Hells, no!"

"Yes. It was he who organized the attack on Astraris. It... it was he who..." Kevin could not go on.

"Who had Kreon killed," finished Malthus heavily.

"Yes."

For a long moment the three stood in silence, each thinking private thoughts. Kevin of his treacherous brother. Janessa of Kevin and the future. Malthus of Valkyr and the end of a reigning house.

"But look what I have found here," exclaimed the warlock with exaggerated enthusiasm. "The maps lied, Kevin. There was no mines. There was only this room."

Kevin became aware suddenly of a clicking noise. He looked about him. On the ancient panel a dial was quivering with life. The dancing needle was inching upward into an arc of red.

The Navigator looked at Malthus with alarm. "Did you touch any of these controls?"

The warlock nodded. "Those over there." He indicated to red-marked verniers. "The symbols were hard to read, for they are in the ancient script of the First Empire. But I believe they said *dampers*. Whatever that may mean, I brushed them accidentally."

"Gods!"

"Is something wrong?"

"What is it, Kevin?" asked Janessa, frightened by the sudden strain in Kevin's face.

Kevin was thinking of the mighty atomic furnaces on the planets of Algol, where the Navigators experimented with the fierce power of the atom.

"This panel controls the power sources for these caverns," he said. "You've removed the dampers and the pile is approaching its critical mass!"

The term meant little to Malthus and less to Janessa. Kevin dragged them toward the door. "There's no time now! Do you know the way out of here?"

Caught by Kevin's sudden fear, the old warlock took the lead, running with unsuspected speed along the tunnels that climbed steadily upward.

Kevin's heart was pounding as he thought of that needle swinging

steadily toward the red arc back in the empty control room. He held tight to Janessa's hand, praying to all the gods of space for time enough.

UNEXPECTEDLY, they burst into the open in a grove of tangled and grotesque trees. The stars were fading from the sky as dawn filtered down out of the night.

Now Kevin took the lead, scrambling over the piles of wreckage toward where the spaceship lay hidden.

They had almost made it when they were discovered. A swarm of alerted guards appeared among the rubble, and the morning air sang suddenly to the whirr of hurtling flails.

Kevin ducked behind a row of upturned stones and reached for his flail. His hand closed on nothing. Then he remembered with sinking heart that he had left it on the floor of Karston's chamber.

Only precipitous retreat would save them, then. There was no question of fighting. Kevin led the way forward, toward the ship, twisting and dodging amidst the wreckage.

Precious moments were wasted in their zigzag course. Minutes that might mean life or death, as that needle in the empty room far below climbed toward the danger mark and the mighty piles strained to be free.

At last they reached the ship. Kevin vaulted into the open valve and pulled Janessa after him. Malthus was lagging a hundred feet behind. Missiles were beginning to clatter against the flanks of the vessel.

Malthus had almost reached the valve when a flying flail took him between the shoulder blades. Sparks flashed and the old warlock collapsed like a scorched rag doll and lay still. Janessa screamed.

The guards were closing in around them, but Kevin leaped down out of the valve and ran to Malthus',

side. The old man's eyes fluttered faintly and his lips moved.

"Go quickly...Kevin. This...is a...small...price to pay..."

Kevin felt him go limp in his arms. Tears smarted behind the Navigator's eyes. Malthus was dead.

Kevin rose slowly, unconscious of the tumult all about him.

"Kevin!" Janessa's voice was shrill and unnatural. Kevin started and broke for the valve again, a shrieking horde of androids at his heels.

With a touch, he swung the heavy valve shut and ran for the control room. The vessel stirred and came to life under him, reaching for the safety of the sky. Under the ship's battered keel the androids surged angrily.

Like an arrow, the ancient ship climbed sunward. Kevin looked down and saw two black spaceships aground, readying themselves for the pursuit.

Then the earth sundered. A ball of fire erupted from the wreckage of the Dead World—a corrosive, expanding ball of fire that rolled over the black ships, over the whole of that region, vaporizing flesh and metal into a roiling black and yellow mushroom cloud that reached upward and outward toward the stratosphere....

The spaceship bucked and protested as the fury of the explosion's concussion struck it. Janessa and Kevin clung together, stunned by the violence of the hell below.

When it was at last over, and the fragments ceased to rain down, the Dead World was once again at peace.

Ahead lay the Valkyr Sun. Kevin and Janessa watched it grow. To them it seemed a symbol of their future life together, for the galaxy slept secure now, and never again would the secrets of the place of All Evil tempt men to dreams of empire.

For Kevin there was ahead the rule of his people, and the people of Aurora. For Janessa there was Kevin. Somehow, that seemed enough.



Under the Lens

A DEPARTMENT:

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

Dear Sir:

Many years ago I used to derive great pleasure from reading MARVEL SCIENCE STORIES, but since the magazine was discontinued I seemed to lose interest in this type of fiction. It was, therefore, with surprise and pleasure that I picked up a magazine in the home of a friend last week and found that MARVEL is being published again.

I particularly wish to comment on the fine story by Arthur J. Burks. His material, besides being highly unusual and entertaining, always has a thread of thought that is, in my opinion, decidedly constructive in nature. I was glad to find the same thing present in this latest story, TRIN. He sets one to thinking. I, for one, would like to read a series of stories by Mr. Burks, dealing with this subject of "adventures in time" in which the scientist character, Lowry might be carried along...or perhaps—better—still—further adventures of the TRIN, Carse Ryal Smith.

Best wishes to you in your revival of MARVEL SCIENCE STORIES. I hope the magazine meets with the success it deserves.

Evelyn Millicent Horton, 550 West 157 St. New York 32, N.Y.

Dear Sir:

I am a student of mathematics, and am also an STF fan. Liked the following stories especially in your magazine.

TRIN, FIREBRAND, and THE DAY THEY LANDED.

Let's have more stories with real Homo Sapiens in them, and some stories with hot mathematics. Give us more of Burks, Chandler and Chadwick. Yours for happy landings.

Gilmore Besson, (No Address)

Dear Sir:

I am so glad the magazine is being published again and especially pleased with the very super-fine story by our old friend Arthur J. Burks, in the November magazine. I enjoyed TRIN very much. Good wishes for your continued success.

Dorothy Herzog, Studio 9-L;
344 W. 72nd St. N.Y. 23, N.Y.

Dear Sir:

Glad to see MARVEL STORIES has been revived, especially in this format. Hurrah for trimmed edges! I have read but one issue of the old MARVEL and I secured this only a few months ago. It

was the last issue you put out before the war and I must say the revived mag is a great improvement. Congrats!

On page 108 you express a desire to have a letter accompany the preference coupon. Well, you've got the letter but the coupon stays where it is. To clip it would be to also clip the ending of one of the best stories in the book. If you have this sort of coupon in following issues put it where a reader won't cut out part of a story along with it.

Here are all the stories listed in order of my preference as you requested and with a few comments thrown in for good measure.

1. FIREBRAND by A. Bertram Chandler. I can read this type of story anytime. Chandler's detailed work and humaneness of characters make this story quite plausible. That switch to the female being the leading character was neat. And that switch at the beginning from Fleming to the girl was perfect. The action throughout the story was well-paced. This story was a relief from those the-heros-through-every-peril things. A sequel for this would be quite nice.

2. TEMPTRESS OF THE TIME FLOW by Gardner F. Fox. Good but rather disappointed at the beginning. There were a few spots that could have been handled better but I'm not complaining. Anything I've ever read by Fox was good and I enjoy his work. Let us have more of his work. But not in anything shorter than a novel. This would spoil his style, make it cramped.

3. OVERLORD OF EARTH by Lloyd Arthur Esbach. Not bad. The descriptive work was very good. The whole story flowed right along to the end with fine style. The ending was what spoiled it. It was too brief. The hero got out of that spot too easy.

4. TRIN by Arthur J. Burks. The only reason I put this in fourth place is because none of the shorts was better. This was too disjointed, too loosely knit. It seemed to me as though the solution was worked out along with the necessary incidentals and the rest written in as an afterthought.

5. THE CATAAAA by A. E. Van Vogt. This was well put together but it didn't stir any particular feeling in me. Left me numb, you might say. Or maybe I'm that way all the time. I don't know. Come to think of it, I got a kick out of the

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first two paragraphs. They sorta tickled my fancy. I never did like Van Vogt's short stories. Where do those last four A's come in?

6. **THE GUINEA-PIG** by Cedric Walker. This wasn't particularly interesting and the ending was too vague. The idea behind the general plot might go well in a novelet.

7. **BEHIND THE ATE BALL** by ?. Cute. It tried too hard to be humorous, though. This was obviously neither an article nor a department as it states on the contents page...

8. **THE DAY THEY LANDED** by Paul Chadwick. Nuts! Period!

The articles and departments were pretty good, especially the Book Reviews.

If there are more stories like the first three and at least three in every issue, I won't complain.

I might as well comment on the cover and inside illos while I'm at it. Saunderson's cover was good, the colors were just right. Keep him. That guy looks too darn heroic, though. Those females! Whoops! Pardon me while I get my wolf whistle. The heading is neat. Keep it. Even the blurbs were good. It even vaguely illustrated a scene in **TEMPTRESS OF THE TIME FLOW**.

Paul's illo for **OVERLORD OF EARTH** was good. I liked it. Not so the one for **THE CATAAAA**. That looked like something from one of the old penny dreadfuls.

The only illos by Napoli that were any good were the ones on pages 72 and 73 for **TEMPTRESS OF THE TIME FLOW**. The one for **FIREBRAND** wasn't too bad but didn't illustrate anything in particular, even the story.

Suggestions:

Keep the trimmed edges. Go bi-monthly. Get a wider selection of artists. Have more than one full page illo for the lead novel. Have a double spread for the novel and each of the novelets. Quit continuing the stories to the back of the book. It's discouraging to be reading peacefully along and come to a line that says, sneer-

ingly, continued halfway from the bottom of page such and such in the first column. That's what it amounts to, anyway. I guess I'd better quit before this runs into a novelet.

Fred Stukeley, 118 N. Richard St. Bedford, Pa.

Dear Sir:

Congratulations on the return of **MARVEL** to the science fiction field. This first post-war (World War II, that is) issue was far from sensational, but I'm hopeful that you will rapidly improve.

A. J. Burks' *Trim* was quite dull: not nearly as good as *SURVIVAL*. The rest of the stories were just so-so—nothing outstanding. The interior illustrations by Napoli were quite well done.

Glad to see a book review section, but let's see some reviews by other than Ackerman and his pseudonym, Weaver Wright.

Gerry de la Ree, 277 Howland Avenue River Edge, N.J.

Dear Ed:

Today in the field of science fiction and fantasy, many new books are being added. When I make my weekly trip to the newsstands to pick up my favorite mags, I am leery of new additions to the market. After thumbing through **MARVEL**, I decided to buy it. I was well rewarded. The stories were superb. After reading the mag I can now truthfully say I will buy it from now on. I will now rate the stories:

Trim—Hard to start but after six pages it was worth the time it took to wade through the beginning. Well written! I always enjoy Burks.

Temptress of the Time Flow—By far the best story in the issue. The romance theme in this one was all shot. I've seen some real apple-polishers, but this guy Trenton does a simonizing job.

Overlord of the Earth—I rate this second best. Kshback sounds like a pseudonym to me. H-m-m-m, I'd like to see more of this boy.

Firebrand—Here comes a brickbat. I must confess I didn't like this one. I stuck to my guns for three pages but it was no use. But don't feel bad; there always has to be a bad one when there are so many good ones.

I enjoyed everyone of the shorts, especially V.V.'s little masterpiece. Of all the mags I read, I think yours is up near the top when it comes to departments. But I won't pass final judgment yet. I'll have to wait and see the length of your letter column. Two more things and then I'll leave. 1) You gotta go bi-monthly. 2) I just love you for those trimmed edges. I'll bet all the other mags are jealous. See you next time.

Jan Romanoff, 26601 So. Western
Lomita, California

We wish that more letters could be printed here but space was limited. To those who's letters were not included, our thanks for your constructive pointers.

Editor

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